

Katherine Potter and The Philosopher's Stone

Prologue

Petunia Dursley was a no nonsense kind of woman. She didn't take well to anything strange or abnormal, even if it was clearly fictional. Yet, she did have a very good reason to fear these strange abnormalities (at least for her), as she had a younger sister that was an embodiment of freakishness to her. Her sister, Lily Potter, was a witch. Now her parents had been immensely pleased when their youngest daughter had received the note from that retched school. They thought it would be amazing to have a witch in the family.

But her sister didn't stop there in infuriating her. She went and got herself married to that Potter boy, James. And, to top it all off, she'd heard from her parents that the two had recently had a baby girl, which surely would be just as abnormal as they were. What really got her though is the name that they gave such a freakish child. Katherine. What a common name! Surely not fit for a child that was so strange. The only solace she could find in the situation was that she had no reason to see the Potters again. In fact, the last time she saw them was several years ago at their wedding.

Petunia didn't know how her train of thoughts had jumped to her sister and when she concentrated hard enough, she felt as if something terrible had happened. She shook the feeling from her mind and went about getting breakfast started.

She set the pan on the stove and began to fry up some bacon. While she was waiting, she picked up the empty milk bottles and went out into the hall. She opened the door to set them out for the milk man and glanced down. Petunia let out a piercing scream and dropped both of the bottles, which shattered on impact.

The cacophony of sounds woke the baby that was sleeping in the bundles at her feet. It started to cry loudly, waving its tiny fists around and pounding them on the blankets covering it snugly. One tiny hand impacted a small letter, causing it to fall to the ground. She looked at it in shock, ignoring the baby's cries as she bent down to examine it.

There were only two words written on the yellow parchment in an emerald, glistening ink: Petunia Dursley.

With trembling hands, she opened the letter, ignoring the burning smells coming from the kitchen.

Petunia Dursley,

As you well know, your younger sister, Lillian Marie Potter, is a witch. What I am sure you do not know is that over the past several years, she and her husband James have been fighting a Dark Wizard by the name of Lord Voldemort.

Petunia shuddered involuntarily at reading the name.

Just three weeks previously, the two were forced to go into hiding to avoid Voldemort as he was aiming for revenge. The Potters had escaped his clutches several times previously, each time keeping him from fulfilling his plans.

Unfortunately, their hiding place was compromised just last night when a traitor in our midst informed Lord Voldemort of their location. He swept down on the house and killed James Potter as he tried to give his wife time to escape.

Lily was caught in their nursery, trying to get away with her daughter. Voldemort killed her swiftly and turned his wand on the baby. His spell backfired somehow, for reasons I can only speculate, destroying the house and himself but only leaving a scar on the child's head.

I have woven a spell around her such that, once she enters your household, she will be protected from any of his followers should they attempt to harm her. I cannot express the urgency that you not ignore this and act quickly on the situation. I am giving you my trust that Katherine Lily Potter will be well treated until the time in which I, or one of my colleagues, will come and collect her when she reaches eleven so she may begin her schooling.

Sincerely Yours,

Albus Dumbledore

Petunia simply stared at the letter then looked past it at the now silent baby, having cried itself to sleep. She was about to bend down and pick up the child when a voice roared from upstairs.

“Petunia! What’s burning!” It seemed as if Vernon had woken, either from her scream, the baby’s crying, or the burning bacon.

“Vernon, come down here please!” she called back up the stairs, her voice slightly higher than normal. The booming footfalls that belonged to her husband scrambled about upstairs for a few moments before he became visible at the top of the stairs. He waddled himself down the stairs and gave a questioning grunt.

Without a word, she handed him the letter and his small, beady eyes darted across the page for several minutes, taking everything in. He grunted a second time and glared at the small, now sleeping bundle.

“We have no time to be taking care of another. I don’t care what this ‘Dumbledore’ says about it, I will not have this...*thing* in my house,” Vernon said. He made his way into the kitchen and called over his shoulder, “Take it to an orphanage. One very, very far away from here.”

Petunia nodded and picked up the bundle carefully, got into the car, and drove off into the morning.

She arrived at an orphanage, she didn’t really remember what it was called, and knocked on the front door politely. She had driven all the way across London and then looked for a place to leave Katherine. It didn’t take her long, although she did feel a pang of guilt as she looked at the state of the neighborhood around the orphanage.

The door opened, revealing a kindly looking woman, wearing a simple dress with an apron around her waist. She smiled kindly at Petunia.

“Ah...What brings you out her, dear?” she asked, eyeing the bundle in Petunia’s arms with interest.

“I’m afraid I found this child on my doorstep and I brought her here as soon as I could,” Petunia said, guilt tugging strongly at her. “Her

name is Katherine Potter and I'm hoping she can find a nice home here."

"I would love to have her. It's been a long time since I've had a toddler here and I would enjoy the experience. She'll have plenty of friends here and she won't be in any danger. This neighborhood may not look it, but it is fairly safe."

Petunia's guilt began to ebb away. This woman was kindly and would raise Katherine far better than she could herself at home.

"If you're still thinking about it, let's just nip inside and get the paperwork over with. I'm Amelia Reinhardt by the way," she said. Amelia used one hand to gently move the blanket away from Katherine's face. "Now isn't she a cute one. But...where did she get that horrible cut?"

The cut on the baby's forehead was standing out clearly against her skin, still a little red as it hadn't healed yet and looked as if it would leave a very distinguishable scar. "I have no idea. This is how I found her."

"Alright, dear," Amelia said. After nearly ten minutes of paperwork, she gave a smile and addressed Petunia. "That's it. It was nice to meet you Petunia. Remember, you can come back anytime, although it would be nice if you called beforehand as I wouldn't want you to see this place too messy."

Petunia nodded and went out the door with Amelia trailing behind her, carrying the still sleeping Katherine. Petunia hesitated for a moment before bidding Amelia goodbye and driving away. She resolved that this was for the best.

Chapter One: The Orphanage, Flight, and Harry

Ten years later, a very small, black haired girl lay staring at the ceiling while shifting uncomfortably on her lumpy mattress. Her emerald green eyes sparkled with...something. It wasn't innocence as she had lost her young mind long ago. Some might say it was power or love or a thousand different things but it didn't matter because the end result was really sparkly eyes. Her skin was a pale color, which was understandable because they were hardly let out into sunshine. A small nose adorned her face and a splash of freckles ran across the bridge.

She was wearing a dirty blouse that might have been white at some time but it surely wasn't now. A ripped, torn, and holed sweater was draped over the bed post near her bare feet and her long skirt (which was also difficult to distinguish the color of) was wrinkled beyond repair. In general, her appearance gave off the impression of riff-raff. Her hair was a tangled mess that she had allowed to grow out and her face had several dirt smudges on it. Her hands were a bit rough and there was a significant amount of dirt under her fingernails.

Of course, the only reason for this was because they lived at The Orphanage. The Orphanage was somewhere in London (the girls didn't know where) and was run by a mean lady by the name of Ms. Reinhardt. Ms. Reinhardt would not allow them to clean up unless someone was visiting. When no one was visiting or checking the general state of The Orphanage, she had them all scrubbing and cleaning. It was really rough work on the hands, knees, and back. She also didn't spend much money on clothes. Her philosophy was that, if they weren't going to go outside, they wouldn't need shoes or new clothes. It was simple enough for her.

None of the girls liked her for several reasons, most of which dealing with cleanliness and such. But, the thing she did that made all of them hate her was that she didn't tell them their names. Instead, they were given numbers. The black haired girl was eleven. Of course, this didn't stop the girls from giving each other nicknames that only they called each other. So, Eleven was really Harmony, for she sang all the time and about anything, often making up her own tunes.

Harmony had two best friends; Mischief, as you could guess, was deft at getting into it; and Rain, who would stand at any window whenever it rained, just for the sake of watching it. They knew she itched to be out in it but Ms. Reinhardt wouldn't allow it, saying she didn't want her sick.

The three friends were close enough together in age, Mischief being the oldest and Rain being slightly younger than Harmony. Well, that's what they thought anyway. They didn't know their birthdays so it was difficult to know age. Currently, it was sometime in late July, at least, according to the calendar.

It was early in the morning and Harmony was still staring at the ceiling, humming absently to herself, stringing note after note together in no particular order. She wondered, for what seemed like the millionth time that morning, where her parents were and if they were still alive. She hadn't been pondering long when Mischief appeared at her bed.

"Hey, Harmony, you ready?" Harmony nodded with a grin and flopped quietly out of bed and donned her sweater, even though it wasn't remotely cold. The two friends had come up with a plan to break into Ms. Reinhardt's office to search for the documents that had their names on them. If anyone could be considered the second in command when it came to mischief, it was Harmony.

The two girls snuck down the stairs, carefully avoiding the ones that squeaked. They made it to the bottom and both grinned as they slowly made their way down the hall. At the end was the office. Mischief pulled out a couple of thin pieces of metal and began to work on the door's lock. After several minutes, there was a loud click as the door unlocked.

"We don't have much time, hurry!" Harmony whispered, keeping lookout at the door while Mischief went to work at the filing cabinets. It took her another fifteen minutes to find the records drawer and ten after that to locate all the girls in The Orphanage. She had to work with description but that wasn't too hard.

"Okay, I got 'em. Let's go," Mischief whispered. The sun was rising swiftly, sending warm rays of light onto their backs. Harmony took the

folders and stuffed them into her overlarge sweater while Mischief worked on locking the door. They had just gotten down the hall and up a couple stairs when Ms. Reinhardt's door opened noisily. The two girls dashed up the steps as quietly as they could and jumped into their beds. Harmony stuffed the folders under her mattress where she knew they'd be safe.

That didn't happen a moment too soon as the door opened with a bang. Ms. Reinhardt was standing there, one hand on her hip and the other resting on the cord that would draw all the curtains open, letting sunlight pour in. She pulled it, causing all the girls to groan and pull pillows over their heads.

"Up! Now! Get down and eat your breakfast! If you hurry, you may be able to finish today's work before lunch time. Move it!" she yelled, slapping each girl wherever she could reach as she walked by.

They all sullenly made their way down the stairs, some wiping the sleep out of their eyes still. Harmony moved over to stand with Mischief and Rain as they entered the dining room. They each went into the kitchen and began to make their own breakfasts.

"Eleven, Twelve, and...Nine! Get to work on my breakfast and make it snappy." Harmony, Mischief, and Rain looked at each other sullenly and began to make Ms. Reinhardt's breakfast. By the time they finished making hers and their breakfasts, they only had five minutes to eat.

Their day's work after that was very tiresome. First, they had to scrub all the floors. All of them. Then, they scrubbed the walls. After that, polishing all the wood then washing the bedding...the list went on and on. It was so long in fact, that they didn't get lunch. The rest of the day was spent in the dormitory, lying on beds and talking quietly amongst themselves. Harmony knew it wouldn't be wise to bring out the folders until she knew for a fact that Ms. Reinhardt was asleep.

Later that night, Mischief came back, informing them all that she was indeed asleep and it was now time. Harmony pulled out the folders and began to slowly distribute them, checking the descriptions against appearances. At the end, she opened what was supposed to be her folder.

Inside she read:

The Islington Orphanage

Name: Katherine Lily Potter

Date of Birth: July 31st, 1980

Date Arrived: November 1st, 1981

Person Delivering: Petunia Dursley

Person Accepting: Amelia Reinhardt

Eyes: Green

Hair: Black

Distinguishing Features: Lightning bolt scar on forehead.

Address of Deliverer: Number Four Privet Dr, Little Whinging, Surrey

Address: 153 Harbinger Way, Islington, London

She stared at it for several moments, simply taking in her name. Katherine Lily Potter...Katherine Potter...Katherine...She smiled at the name, thinking it fit her well.

“Hey, Harmony! What’s your name!” Mischief called from across the room.

“Katherine! Yours!” she replied

“Melanie!”

“Cool!”

“Rain! What’s your name!” the two chorused.

“Emily!”

“Cool!”

Close friends began to migrate to each other's beds, filling the dorm with talking although it wasn't enough to wake Ms. Reinhardt.

"So, *Katherine*, when's your birthday?" *Melanie* asked. As they were trying to get used to their names, they used them instead of the names they'd given each other.

Katherine looked down at her folder again and sat staring at it. "What? It isn't a bad one is it?" Emily asked with concern.

"N-no! I-it's tomorrow!" she squealed, hugging her two friends tightly. "I'm going to be eleven!"

Not much sleep was gained that night but none of the girls cared.

Katherine woke early the next morning expectantly, waiting for some sign that told her she was older. Unfortunately, that moment didn't come. All she succeeded in doing was making herself restless. She jumped out of bed and threw on her raggedy jumper. Taking the pencil she had nicked from Ms. Reinhardt's office, she used it to write Melanie a note on the wall next to her bed.

Mischief-Melanie,

I can't stand it anymore. I'm leaving. This folder says that someone named Dursley found me so I'm going to find her. See what she knows about me. I don't expect I'll be back for a while.

Lots of love,

Katherine

She set the pencil by the note so it could be erased when read and folded the paper in her folder up, stuffing it into her skirt pocket. Once downstairs, she used Melanie's pins to pick the lock on the office door again.

Inside she moved quickly to the old safe behind the desk and pulled open the door. She pulled out the wad of pound notes from inside and stuffed them in a skirt pocket before shutting the safe again and locking the office door.

She felt strangely free as she padded barefoot out into the warm morning air. The sound of cars could be heard from somewhere to the left of her so she decided to go that way. Cars were rushing back and forth along a road not far from The Orphanage. She had never seen this many in one place before. Large ones, small ones, huge trucks, and zipping motorbikes. There were people walking down the street in both directions and on both sides. Traffic lights kept blinking all along the road and the street lamps were still on as it wasn't completely light out yet.

She noticed some of the people were giving her odd looks that ranged from sympathy to disgust. Feeling nervous under their gazes, she made her way down the street away from the nearest stop lights.

Just then, a large, white squarish looking car pulled up to the curb next to her. Several people came off and some from the sidewalk got on. A *bus*, she thought. Then, she had an idea. Without waiting to think about it too much, she darted onto the bus.

"Hello there, lass. Lost your parents?" asked the driver, giving her a friendly smile. Katherine gave a small nod. "Know where you're going? I've got a map here if you need it," he said, putting the bus into gear and moving out into traffic.

"T-thanks..." she muttered, stepping up to the map, carefully keeping her balance as the driver got the vehicle up to speed. The map had districts named and a bright red line showing the busses route. She couldn't make heads or tails of the map so she scanned the names, hopping to find Little Whinging or Surrey. To her dismay, it wasn't on there.

She sat down in a seat at the front of the bus, as close to the driver as one could get. The people in the bus were looking at her like the ones outside were, their eyes raking up her clothes, tangled hair, bare feet, which were sticking straight out in front of her as the seat was too deep for them to hang over.

Over the next half hour, the driver kept making stops to drop people off while more got on. As time went on, less people got on and more got off until it was just only her and the driver.

"So lass, where you off to?" he asked in a kindly voice.

Katherine unfolded her paper and looked at the Dursley's address. "Surrey," she mumbled.

"Hmmm...That's on the other side of town..." the driver said thoughtfully. Her heart fell. *How am I supposed to get all the way across town without getting lost?* she thought. "Tell you what," the driver said after a few minutes, "I'll take you where you need to go after I drop this monster off at the barn."

"Oh...y-you d-don't have t-to..."

"I know I don't. I haven't got anything better to do and you seem like you really need it."

"A-alright...h-here," she stuttered, standing up to hand him the bundle of bills she had, feeling a little skittish about taking the free ride without paying.

"Oh no, no! I don't need your money, lass." When he saw the persistence in eyes he sighed. "Alright, but you're only buying a bus ticket. So here," he said, handing her back all but a couple pounds of the bundle.

The driver, whose name was Mitchell Offill, a twenty three year old going from job to job to make a living, was true to his word. Once they got to the bus barn, he pulled his car up and told her to hop inside. During the car ride, she began to feel a bit more comfortable with being around him and began to hum softly. After only a few minutes of that he noticed.

"That you Kit?" he asked, using the pet name he'd already come up with for her.

Katherine nodded with a small blush. "That's really good. Please, continue."

So she did. Most of the ride was made with little talking as Mitchell seemed to enjoy her humming immensely. "Better than the radio,"

and “Nice and soothing,” he had said. By seven thirty, more cars began to flood the motorways, making traffic slow down to a crawl.

Mitchell began to inquire into her life and how she came to be out on the road that early in the morning dressed as she was. After hesitating for a moment, she confessed to everything that went on at The Orphanage. By the time she finished, she was really glad they were currently stopped at a red light as Mitchell looked just about ready to kill someone.

“Thanks for telling me Kit. I’ll get the authorities notified as soon as I can.”

Finally, they entered Surrey and Mitchell scanned a map to find Privet drive. “Not much longer now,” he said when there was only five more minutes in the trip left. He pulled onto the street and began to drive slowly.

“It was Number Four right?” he asked, prompting a nod from Katherine as she consulted the paper. He pulled up to the curb in front of Number Four and they stepped out of the car.

“You okay?” he asked, looking down at her with a comforting smile.

“Yeah...I’ll be fine. Would you...um...”

“Come up with you?” She nodded. “Of course! I wouldn’t want to do this alone either.”

The two made their way up the driveway, careful not to step on the meticulously kept lawn. Katherine knocked on the door hesitantly. It was quiet for a moment before someone bellowed to get the door.

“Yes sir!” came a voice from inside. A young boy, wearing very baggy clothing that looked much too big for him, opened the door.

“Can I help...you...” he said in a subdued voice that turned to curiosity at the sight of Katherine. Emerald met emerald as they stared at each other. There couldn’t have been an inch in difference in their heights and he could have been the same age as she was. He had dark red hair, her small, pixie nose, and her freckle splattering. He was thin

like her, which didn't bode well for him as she was extremely thin from the rigorous work and lack of food she got at the orphanage.

"Yes, is there a Petunia Dursley here?" Mitchell asked, breaking the silence that had fallen over them. The boy nodded slowly before coming to his senses and invited them in. He showed them into the sitting room and after taking a long look at Katherine, dashed out of the room.

A few minutes later, the boy came back into the room accompanied by a very large, beefy man and a thin, willowy woman. The moment the woman laid eyes on Katherine, she gasped.

Mitchell, ignoring the outburst, addressed the two adults. "You are the Dursleys, yes?" he asked but continued on without waiting, "This here is Katherine Potter. It seems that you were the ones that delivered her to the orphanage in Islington, am I correct?" The two adults nodded and the boy's eyes widened.

The woman looked a little worried but the man seemed to be purpling in the face. "Harry, why don't you go wait in the kitchen," Mrs. Dursley said quickly. The boy, Harry, looked at Katherine for a moment, indicating to follow, before he disappeared.

Katherine gave Mitchell a look and he smiled. "Go ahead, Kit. You don't want to be bored by grown up talk."

Mrs. Dursley looked like she was going to say something but kept her mouth closed as Katherine made her way out of the room. When she entered the kitchen, Harry was waiting for her. He stared at her once again, making her feel nervous at such scrutiny.

"Is your last name really Potter?" he asked carefully.

"Yeah..."

"Oh...well I guess this is yours," he said, pulling a crumpled bit of yellow parchment out of his pocket and handing it to her. "These've been arriving all week. My...dad I guess you could call him, although he doesn't treat me that way, has been burning them. This was the first that came and I luckily kept it with me."

Katherine had been only half listening as she took the envelope and read the slightly wrinkled surface.

Miss K. Potter

4 Privet Dr.

Little Whinging

Surrey

She flipped it over. Sealing the letter was a glob of scarlet wax with a coat of arms pressed into it. An H surrounded by a badger, snake, eagle, and lion. With trembling fingers, she pulled the letter open carefully. Several more pieces of yellow parchment were inside, the first which read:

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Miss Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

She stared at the letter, then reread it, and then stared at it some more. It had to be a joke. It had to be. There was no way she

was...and there was no way there was...She shook her head sternly, banishing the thoughts that this felt right.

“So, what’d it say?” Harry asked after a few minutes. When she didn’t answer him, he took the letter from her hand and read it. He was about to say something when the adults came into the kitchen.

“BOY! I TOLD YOU NO READING THOSE LETTERS!” Mr. Dursley bellowed. The large man snatched the letter from his hand and was about to tear it in half when the door chime rang. “Now what!”

He marched off into the entrance hall, followed closely by Katherine and Harry, who both wanted the letter back, and Mitchell. Mrs. Dursley seemed to be in too much shock to follow.

Everyone froze, however, once the door opened. Outside, a large man, perhaps twelve feet tall with dark and wild hair, stood talking to an older looking woman who had her hair in a tight bun.

“I’m telling yeh Professor, I’ve been sendin’ letters all week and there’s still no sign that they’ve been received...” the large man was saying until he caught sight of the open door.

Both parties stared at each other for a few moments before the old woman took the initiative. “Ah, Mr. Dursley, I am Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress at Hogwarts, and I’m here to discuss with you...Katherine?” At that point, McGonagall caught sight of her standing behind everyone in her tattered jumper, dirty skirt, tangled hair, dirty face, and bare feet.

Katherine looked down at her feet as all eyes turned to her. “She looks jus’ like Lily...” the giant man said into the silence.

After a few moments, Mitchell once again intervened on her behalf, drawing everyone’s attention to him. “Why don’t you come in? I’ve just heard an amazing story and I’m sure it would interest you both,” he said, gesturing for the two to follow him.

“Now see here! This is my house and I won’t be having any of this!” Mr. Dursley said. All it took to keep him quiet was a stern look from

the giant man. Katherine and Harry watched with amazement as the adults once again went into the sitting room.

"Harry, please bring your mother in here," Mitchell called from the sitting room, clearly still being in control of the situation.

The two children entered the kitchen and told Mrs. Dursley that she was wanted. She seemed to snap out of something and thanked Harry.

"That's got to be the nicest thing she's ever done for me," he said in an awed voice. "So...why're you here?" he asked after a few minutes of trying to eaves drop on the conversation.

"Well, I was at an orphanage..." she began and told him all about The Orphanage, Ms. Reinhardt, and the girls living there.

"Wow...that doesn't sound much worse than I have it here," he mumbled.

"What?"

"It's my 'dad' really," he said, clearly not liking his father enough to give his title the proper respect. "I tend to make strange things happen around me. Stuff like making glass disappear and getting on top of roofs. Just a couple months ago, I accidentally vanished a pane of glass that was holding a boa constrictor in the zoo. It got out, 'attacked' my brother, and I got in trouble. I didn't leave my cupboard until summer started."

"Cupboard?"

"Huh? Oh yeah...I sorta live in the cupboard under the stairs. My dad's idea."

"That's horrible."

"Yeah...well, you get used to it." He shuffled his feet awkwardly as if the subject was uncomfortable. Katherine didn't push it and began to hum idly, whiling away the time while they waited. In the other room

several people shouted and yelled yet through it all was the calming voice of Mitchell to soothe everyone.

"That's really nice," Harry said suddenly.

"Huh?" Katherine stopped humming.

"Oh, don't stop!" She smiled at him and began to hum again. Another ten minutes passed while they waited, listening distantly to the debate in the other room.

"Kit, Harry? Can you two come in here?" Mitchell called. They looked at each other and shrugged.

When they entered the room, they looked around. Mitchell was smiling, McGonagall was looking stern, the giant was beaming, Mr. Dursley was purple, and Mrs. Dursley had a carefully neutral face.

"Miss Potter, as you know, my name is Professor McGonagall. I would like to personally inform you that you, my dear, are a witch. As such, you are eligible to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year."

"O...kay..."

"Right, my job is done here. Hagrid, please help her get ready for the school year as soon as possible and please find her some proper accommodations." McGonagall stood up and swept out of the room. The front door closed behind her, ringing in the silence.

"Well, I'm Rubeus Hagrid," the giant man said, extending a trashcan lid sized hand to her. She shook it cautiously. "There's no time like the present, les' get goin' then."

Katherine glanced at Mitchell and he nodded, standing up and taking her gently by the arm. "A moment if you would Mr. Hagrid?"

The giant nodded and let him lead her into the kitchen once again. "What is it?"

"It's Harry," she whispered and then began to spell out what Harry had told her and what she had deduced about his life at home. "And they keep him in a cupboard! You have to do something," she whispered fiercely.

"You can be sure that I will," he muttered darkly, casting a glare toward the sitting room. "I'll be right back. Wait right here," he said sternly. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his wallet. As he went into the sitting room he called, "Mr. Dursley, a word if you please?"

The next thing that happened shocked everyone, even Hagrid, who, by the sound of it, didn't know much about what was going on. She heard distinctly from the other room, "Vernon Dursley, you are under arrest..." She didn't hear anything after that because there was an enraged bellow and then the scampering of feet.

Soon, Harry came dashing back into the kitchen. Close on his tail was Mr. Dursley, a look of pure fury on his face. Harry had taken refuge behind Katherine who was now directly in front of the grown man. Right when she thought she was going to be smashed, the room filled with quick, pulsing music that seemed to emanate from the air itself.

Katherine felt a strange vibrating sensation coursing through her and knew at once that she was the cause of all the music ringing through the kitchen. Mr. Dursley looked around in alarm but could do nothing to stop his charge. A foot away, he ran into a very solid wall of something, causing an echo around the room like the sound of a gong, which also seemed to bring the music to a climax.

With the now silent kitchen and no raging man bearing down on her, Katherine looked around and saw Hagrid and Mitchell staring at her with wide eyes. Mr. Dursley seemed to have knocked himself out on whatever he hit and was sprawled out on the floor in front of her.

"Kit, why don't you go with Hagrid now? I'll sort things through here."

Katherine nodded uncertainly and stepped around Mr. Dursley. She gave Mitchell a quick hug which he returned warmly. Even though

she'd only known him for less than a couple hours, she thought he was the nicest grown up she'd ever met.

"See ya kiddo," he whispered in her ear. "Don't be afraid to use that money on some clothes." With a departing wink, he gave her a gentle push toward Hagrid.

"Ready ter go now Katherine?"

"Call me Kate."

Hagrid smiled. "Alright. Now, just hold onto this little can here and we'll be off."

Kate did as she was told and they stood there for a moment before, with a strange pull behind her navel, they were whisked away in a rush of air, sound, and color.

Chapter Two: Diagon Alley

Her feet hit the ground with more than enough force to cause her to lose balance. She was caught, however, by large hand that could have wrapped all the way around her easily.

“Alright there Kate?” Hagrid asked with a smile.

Too shaken up to answer properly, Kate merely nodded as she looked around. The place where they had landed was very dark and shabby. There was an odd assortment of people inside; a couple of old women in a dark corner, a little man in a top hat sitting at the bar and deep in conversation with the bartender, and the bartender himself who looked very bald and toothless.

The small bit of talking that had been going on before they came in died away as everyone turned their gazes toward them. They all seemed to know Hagrid as everyone gave him a wave and the bartender asked, “The usual, Hagrid?” That left only her to stare at.

“Sorry Tom, Hogwarts business,” Hagrid said with a grin and patting his hand on her shoulder, causing her knees to buckle. “Oh...Sorry ‘bout that Kate.”

“Is that—can it be—Katherine Potter?” the old bartender asked with open eyes. In response Hagrid beamed around at everyone. The bartender, Tom, shuffled around the counter and shook her hand energetically.

“Welcome back, Miss Potter! Welcome back!” By then, there was a made scramble as everyone in the pub got up and dashed toward her. They pressed around her, each one jostling her as they tried to shake her hand or touch her. Kate let out a frightened whimper and began to look around frantically. She was never good with crowds or new people in general.

“Hey you lot, yeh’re scarin’ her!” Hagrid bellowed over the noise. The pub went silent again and the people slowly backed away from her, apologizing as they went.

“Sorry Miss Potter, didn’t mean to frighten you...”

“Just glad you’re back.”

It was then that the people seemed to have seen the state of her clothes.

“Where do you think she’s been, to have clothes like that?”

“Beats me, but I can assure you if I ever find out, they’ll get a piece of my mind.”

“Er, sorry ‘bout that Kate. Didn’t have time ter warn yeh,” Hagrid mumbled, shifting his feet nervously.

“But, why did they act that way?”

“It’s because yeh’re famous!” Kate gave him a disbelieving look. “Yeh are! Here, why don’t we sit down for a little bit and I’ll tell yeh everythin’.” He sat them at a table off to the side and away from everyone. Tom came by as soon as they sat down and served them some hot soup.

“Now, all this begins with a person named V...Vol...” Hagrid took a large swallow of soup. “Blimey, people were scared of him, still are in fact.”

“Can you write it down?”

“Nah, can’t spell it. Okay—*Voldemort*.” Hagrid shudder from head to toe. “Don’ make me say it again. Anyway, this wizard started lookin’ for followers about twenty years ago. Got ‘em too. Some were afraid and some just wanted ‘o bit ‘o his power, ‘cause he was getting’ himself some. Dark days Kate...very dark days. Didn’t know who ter trust and no one wantin’ to get friendly with strange wizards or witches. He was takin’ over, killin’ anyone who got in his way. One ‘o the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon that’s ‘cause ‘o Dumbledore. Scared of Dumbledore he was.

“Now, yer mum an’ dad were as good a witch an’ wizard as I ever knew. Head Boy an’ Girl at Hogwarts in their day. Suppose the myst’ry is why You-Know-Who never tired to get ‘em on his side before. Probably ‘cause they were too close too Dumbledore.”

“Maybe he thought he could persuade ‘em or maybe he jus’ wanted ‘em outta the way. All I know is, he turned up in the village where you was livin’ on Halloween ten years ago. He came ter yer house an’...” At that moment, he pulled out a large handkerchief and blew his nose loudly.

“An’ You-Know-Who killed ‘em. Then—an’ this is the real myst’ry of the thing—he tried to kill you too. But he couldn’t. Ever wondered why you got that mark on yer forehead? That’s no ordinary cut. That’s what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh. Took care of yer mum an’ dad an’ even yer house, but it didn’t work on you an’ that’s why yer famous, Kate. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill ‘em. An’ you was only a baby, an’ you lived.”

Kate’s mind was working over time to absorbing all this information. Her eyes went out of focus as she concentrated on a memory that seemed to be forming out of thin air. *She was lying in a crib. Shouts were coming from downstairs. A man’s voice, telling someone to “Take Katherine and run!”*

Footsteps pounded up the stairs and the nursery door opened. A beautiful woman with vibrant red hair and piercing green eyes came into the room, looking slightly panicked. She came over and picked her up, cradling her tenderly in her arms. A rocking explosion came from downstairs.

“James!” the woman cried. She made a mad dash toward the door but it was blown open before she could reach it. A tall, dark robed figure walked through the door. He had pasty white skin and glowing red eyes.

“Ah, my dear Lily, step aside now and I’ll let you live,” the figure said in a silky voice.

“No...never,” the woman, Lily, breathed, backing up, holding Kate behind her back. The figure swept Lily aside, flinging her against the crib and causing her to loose a grip on Kate. Kate began to cry from being thrown to the ground.

“Not Kate, not Kate, please not Kate!”

"Stand aside, you silly girl...stand aside, now!"

"Not Kate, please no, take me, kill me instead! Not Kate..."

The man laughed harshly and muttered something. Instantly, Lily began to scream. She screamed so loudly that it hurt her ears and made her cry even louder.

"Please...have mercy...have mercy..."

"Stand aside."

"No...I won't...never..."

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" A brilliant flash of green light filled the room and Kate watched with wide eyes as Lily fell to the floor, her eyes staring up at the ceiling. The man laughed coldly and pointed his wand at her.

"Avada Kedavra," he said with a smile. A bright flash of light and an extreme pain filled her forehead.

Kate, whose head had sunk to the table, opened her eyes with a gasp. Hagrid was kneeling beside her, trying to shake her awake.

"Kate, yeh okay? Yeh went all rigid on me," Hagrid said in a worried voice.

"I saw them Hagrid...my mum and Voldemort," Hagrid shuddered, "He didn't want to kill her but she wouldn't move so he hurt her and then he killed her," she said, tears welling up in her eyes. Hagrid brought her gently into his arms and hugged her. She sniffed a few more times before her quiet sobs went silent.

"Let's not think about this anymore. Tell yeh what, let's just get into the Alley and we'll get yer school stuff," Hagrid said, picking her up gently and setting her on her feet. Kate nodded slightly and followed Hagrid out of the pub and into its tiny backyard.

Hagrid pulled out a vibrant pink umbrella and tapped a brick above the trashcan three times. "Remember, three up and two across." Where he tapped the brick, a small hole was forming which soon

widened into an arch large enough for even Hagrid to get through without ducking.

“Welcome to Diagon Alley!” Kate wished she had about a dozen more eyes. All around her were the strangest shops she’d ever seen, mind she hadn’t seen any shops before. Shops selling cauldrons, potion goods, wands, books, brooms...you name it and it was there. Hagrid led them down the road toward a great big white building.

“Gringotts,” he said. Outside, wearing a uniform of gold and scarlet was a— “That’s a goblin,” Hagrid whispered into her thoughts. She smiled nervously at the goblin, causing him to look at her in disbelief. He was only about a half head shorter than she was.

Hagrid walked them right through the doors and up to the counters where other goblins were helping people. They stepped up to a free goblin, who looked down his nose at Kate, although she suspected he tried to do the same with Hagrid.

“We’d like ter take some money outta Miss Katherine Potter’s vault.”

“Do you have her key, sir?”

“Oh, yeah, got that somewhere in here,” Hagrid mumbled, digging through his coat in search of the elusive key. After some ten minutes in which all sorts of things were dumped onto the goblin’s counter, the key was finally produced along with a letter. “Here’s her key and I’ve also got a letter from Professor Dumbledore. It’s about You-Know-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen.”

The goblin took the key and read carefully through the letter. “Everything seems to be in order. Griphook!” Another goblin appeared. “Take these two down to vaults two hundred and nine and seven hundred and thirteen.”

Griphook nodded and led them across the hall and into a narrow stone passageway lit with torches. He whistled and a railcar came hurtling down the tracks that she just noticed were on the floor. They climbed in, Hagrid with some difficulty, and then they were off.

The cart hurtled them down a maze of passageways, turning sharply at random intervals as if it didn't want them to remember the way out. Kate was far too busy enjoying the sharp turns and blinding speeds to notice which turns they took. Hagrid looked very green, as if his stomach didn't agree with the turns the cart decided to make.

For another five minutes, they hurtled down the tracks until the cart came to a screeching halt in front of a small door. Griphook hopped out and used the key to unlock the door. Inside were mountains of gold, silver, and bronze coins.

"All yers," Hagrid said with a smile. "Those big ones are called Galleons. Seventeen silver Sickles to a galleon and twenty-nine bronze Knuts to a Sickle. Easy enough to understand once you get used ter it," he said while pilling large amounts of coins into a bag.

When they were finished, Griphook locked the door again and hopped into the cart. "Next stop, vault seven hundred and thirteen."

"Can we go a little slower?"

"One speed only," the goblin said to Hagrid.

Once again, the cart hurtled off down the tracks, taking them deeper underground and building up speed as they went. They zipped around tight corners at unbelievable speeds that made Hagrid groan and Kate smile with glee. The cart even rattled over an underground ravine. Kate looked over the side to try to see the bottom but Hagrid gave a groan and pulled her back by her sweater.

The cart once again screeched to a halt and they clambered out. Griphook stepped up importantly to the door and stroked it with his finger. The door melted away slowly.

"If anyone but a Gringott's goblin tried that, they'd be sucked into the other side."

"How often do you check it?" Kate asked curiously.

"About every ten years," Griphook replied with a nasty grin.

Kate expected to see mountains of gems or unspeakable treasures behind such a door but she was disappointed when all she could see was a grubby looking package.

“What’s that?” Kate asked curiously.

“Can’t tell yeh. Hogwarts business. Dumbledore trustin’ me,” Hagrid said, stuffing the package into one of his many coat pockets. They got back into the cart and rocketed back up to the surface.

Kate and Hagrid stepped into the light outside, causing her to wince at the brightness. “Got yer list?” She nodded, holding up the parchment. “Great. Why don’t yeh head over to Madame Malkin’s? I think I’m in need of a pick me up back at the Cauldron. I hate those blasted carts.”

Kate nodded nervously and watched as Hagrid disappeared into the crowd, sort of. She made her way down the street until she found the robe shop. When she entered, a little bell tinkled in the back, informing the owner that she had a customer.

Madame Malkin came bustling up with a smile. She turned out to be a squat woman with a kindly face and a good heart. “Hogwarts dear?” she asked. Kate nodded. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you set up in no time but...goodness, who gave you those awful clothes?”

She blushed crimson and looked down at the floor. “Those just won’t do for a student. I’ll get one of my girls to make a run into London for you. Get you some nice clothes to go with your robes.”

With that, Madame Malkin guided her to the back of the shop where another boy was being fitted. She was put on a stool and Madame Malkin began to take measurements.

“Amy? Would you mind running an errand for this one here? She’s in need of some proper clothes and by the looks of it shoes,” the owner said to the woman pinning up the boy’s robes.

“Sure, just give me her measurements and I’ll get that squared away,” she said, looking up at Kate and grinning with a mouthful of pins.

“Um...I can pay for that...” Kate said, handing Amy her wad of pounds.

“That’s very nice of you, dear. Saves me a run to Gringotts to exchange some money. Where’re you staying, dear? I need to know where to send it when I’m done.”

“I-I don’t know...I came with Hagrid and...”

“Ah, say no more. I’ll go speak with him after I’m done here.” And that was that. Amy finished with the boy, who was looking at Kate with disgust; something to do with her clothes she guessed. She watched as Amy left the store only to stop and speak with Hagrid who had just arrived. By the time Madame Malkin had finished her work, Amy had left. She gave her three sets of robes, a black pointed hat, and a heavy cloak.

Hagrid took the bundles of robes from her and led her from shop to shop, buying her trunk, potion ingredients, telescope, cauldron, scales, and books. Kate had a good time in Flourish and Blott’s and she insisted on getting several extra books before they could leave. “So, now all that’s left is yer wand and yer present.”

“Oh...you don’t have to...”

“Nonsense! It’s yer birthday! You should get presents on yer birthday.” And with that, Hagrid led her off to Eeylops Owl Emporium. Hagrid thought he had gone in with Kate up she had gotten distracted at Magical Menagerie. A midnight black kitten was in the window of the store and she darted off inside for a look.

Kate loved cats with a passion and it was quickly decided that she wanted *that* kitten. So she bought it along with several kitten treats. The kitten was well behaved for the moment and was small enough to sit on top of her head, which it did. It blended right in with her hair and only appeared to be a lump with hazel eyes. She caught up with Hagrid outside Eeylops and he handed her a great white owl.

“Wow Hagrid!”

“I thought yeh’d like it. Where were yeh though? Yeh weren’t inside...” he trailed off when he saw the hazel eyes of the kitten eyeing him

curiously. "Ah...well I guess..." but what he was going to say she never found out because he sneezed loudly, drawing everyone's attention from all over the alley.

"I'm allergic ter cats," Hagrid mumbled. Kate looked a little guilty but couldn't keep an impish smile off her face. "Yeh little rascal!" Hagrid said. She giggled and skipped off down the street, idly humming to herself once again.

Hagrid caught up to her and lead her to the final shop of the day. Olivander's. They entered the quiet and dusty shop, looking around nervously for the shop keeper.

"Ah, I've been wondering when you would come here Miss Potter."

Both Hagrid and Kate jumped, her kitten hissed, and her owl hooted.

Mr. Olivander chuckled and began rummaging through his desk for something. "You have your mother's eyes," he said suddenly. "I remember clearly when she came in here to get her first wand. Ten and a quarter inches, swishy, made of willow. Nice for charm work."

"Your father on the other hand, favored a mahogany wand. Eleven inches, pliable, and a little more power. Excellent for transfiguration. Well, I say your father favored it but it's really the wand that favors the wizard, or in your case the witch."

"Well, enough of that. Which is your wand arm Miss Potter?"

"Er...my right?"

"Hold out your arm if you please." He took a tape measure and began to measure from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit, and around her head. Mr. Olivander was now searching through the rows of boxes, letting the tape measure doing its own little thing. "That will do," he said and the tape measure fell to the floor in a crumpled heap.

"Right then, try this one Miss Potter. Beechwood and dragon heartstring, nine inches. Nice and flexible. Give it a wave, that's it."

No sooner had she waved the wand had he snatched it out of her hands.

“Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy.” Kate thought she heard a song drifting through the background noise around her but when she tried and the wand was snatched away, it vanished.

“Here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy.”

Kate tried and tried and tried but none of the wands seemed to satisfy Mr. Olivander. The tried wands were piling up into a small pile next to her but Mr. Olivander seemed to become happier with the more wands she tried.

“Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we’ll find the perfect match here somewhere...Hmmm...I wonder. Yes, why not. Unusual combination. Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple.” Kate took the wand and the moment her fingers wrapped around the wood, the song she had heard earlier exploded through the shop.

Mr. Olivander managed to get out a, “My word!” before he was drowned out by the sound. Kate, with a blissful smile on her face, waved the wand, sending golden sparks shooting from the tip.

The song finally faded away, leaving a wide eyed Hagrid and an even wider eyed Mr. Olivander. “Well...now isn’t that curious? So very curious indeed...” he muttered to himself as he wrapped the wand up in brown paper. Kate paid seven galleons for the wand while Mr. Olivander was still muttering, “Curious...curious...”

“Um...excuse me but, what’s curious?”

Mr. Olivander stared at her for a few moments. “I remember every wand I’ve ever sold, Miss Potter. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather—just one other. It is curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother gave you that scar.”

Kate stared, not sure how she was to respond to that.

“Yes, thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the witch, remember...I think we must expect great things from you, Miss Potter...After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Names did great things—terrible, yes, but great.”

Kate shivered involuntarily and took her wand and purchases out of the shop, looking over her shoulder as she went. She spotted Mr. Olivander stoop down over his desk and begin to scribble a note.

“Well Kate, I’ve got yeh all set up here. Yeh’ll be spendin’ the rest ‘o the summer here,” Hagrid said when they got back to the Leaky Cauldron. “I’ll be by ter pick yeh up on the first. Be careful and have fun.”

With that, Hagrid left. Kate was a bit worried about what she needed to do but she shook it off and pulled out one of her books, Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1). She was reading that, lying on the bed and idly humming and kicking her feet in the air, when the door opened.

It was Amy from Madame Malkin’s. She was loaded down with shopping bags from all over. “There you go. Everything you’ll ever need for a very long time. Come by and visit the shop if you’re ever having problems,” she said with a smile before stepping out of her room and closing the door.

Kate desperately wanted to try her new clothes on but she didn’t want to get them dirty and thought she should have a bath first. So, she went downstairs and nervously approached Tom at the bar.

“What is it I can do for you Miss Potter?”

“Um...I can’t find the baths and I sorta need to...um...”

“Say no more. I’ll get you settled right away.” And that he did. She followed him up to her room and he waved his wand at a wall. A door appeared and opened, revealing a large bathroom including sink, a full bath, and toilet.

“Wow!”

Tom chuckled and beckoned her closer. "Remember, they haven't given you the notice that says no magic out of school, so, have fun." With a wink, Tom left the room.

Kate locked the door and made her way into the bathroom. She pulled off her tattered jumper, her dirty and stained blouse, and her wrinkled skirt and hopped into the water. It was pleasantly warm and had a faint soupy smell to it. Over the next hour, she washed herself thoroughly, making sure her hair was dirt free, her hands spotless, and her face as clean as could be.

When she got out of the bath, she noticed her hair, which was usually in tangles and hung near the middle of her back, was really much longer, falling past her waist. She didn't know if she liked it that long. She looked in the mirror and closed her eyes comparing the two lengths, deciding if she wanted to cut her hair or leave it.

She opened her eyes with a gasp as she felt a tingling sensation on her head. Her hair had shortened to its previous length and was sleek, shiny, and surprisingly dry. She decided not to think about it for the moment as she dried herself off and chose some clothes to wear.

Amy had gotten her several styles of clothes, ranging from long skirts and blouses, to form fitting jeans and T-shirts. The real surprise was the underwear in one bag. She'd never really had any before, unless you call the diapers she wore when she was a baby, underwear.

To say it felt odd would have been an understatement but she got over it. The truly odd thing was that Amy seemed to think that she needed five pairs of shoes. Three pairs of sneakers, one pair of black dress shoes, and a pair of sandals. Kate shrugged as she pulled on a pair of jeans, a green T-shirt, white socks, and blue and gold sneakers.

She wriggled her toes in the confines of the shoes uncomfortably for a few moments, trying to get used to the feeling but it wasn't happening. She pulled them and her socks off and walked down for dinner barefoot.

Chapter Three: The Hogwarts Express

Kate had the most fun she'd ever had in her entire life. She had free reign of Diagon Alley and could eat whatever and whenever she wanted. She was often to be seen sitting in the Leaky Cauldron with a spell book open and her wand out, attempting each spell she read over. Of course the first thing she did was use her owl, which she named Hedwig, to send a letter to her friends at the orphanage. She included an extra piece of parchment with the letter just in case they wanted to write back.

Her kitten, Hazel, she named after its eyes. Hazel turned out to be very playful, even for a young kitten, and would often bother her until she made a paper ball for her to play with. She loved it to death.

The only thing she enjoyed more than her books and magic was Quiditch. Quality Quiditch Supplies was one of the best shops in the world, second only to Flourish and Blott's and Zonko's. Those shops could be considered her "regular haunts," as she never spent a day in the Alley without entering them. In fact, she had an entire bag full of Filibuster's Amazing Wet-start, no-heat fireworks. She didn't care too much for the dung bombs as she'd spent enough time among filth.

In Flourish and Blott's, she spent a great deal of her time reading and looking up rather fun hexes. The owner of the shop even knew her by name and they had gotten into many long discussions about everything from the banishing hex to the world in general. He even helped her pinpoint what she had done to her hair on her first day there.

"You, I believe, are a Metamorphmagus."

"A what?"

"Metamorphmagus. Anyway, a person with this ability has the power to change their appearance with a thought. I think I've got a book in here somewhere...ah! Here it is. Why don't you take this and read up on it? Be sure to bring it back before you leave," the owner had said, handing her a small, fist sized book.

With the help of the book, she became very adept at changing her appearance. She could cycle through the rainbow with her hair color and she had worked very hard on learning how to cover up her scar. She still didn't like the looks most people gave her when they saw it. Staring at her with their mouths open and sometimes pointing.

The last day of the holidays came and she was packed up and ready to go by five in the morning. She'd returned the book on metamorphamagi the day before so all she needed to do was wait for Hagrid. She'd received a letter the other day to be ready by eight. So when the time rolled around, she dragged her trunk down the stairs and sat at a table to wait. Tom brought over a plate of hot toast and butter along with a glass of pumpkin juice.

Kate didn't know why the magical world insisted on this drink but it was good. Something to do with the magic she guessed. She supposed if a muggle decided to make pumpkin juice, it would be just that: juice from a pumpkin.

Around eight fifteen, Hagrid came striding in the room from the door that led into muggle London.

"Alright there, Kate?" he called as soon as he saw her. She grinned. "Well, let's get goin' then." Hagrid picked up her trunk and led her out into London. There was a taxi waiting just outside and Hagrid loaded her trunk into the boot.

"Get her to King's Cross Station," Hagrid said to the driver before coming around and handing Kate a ticket. "This is yer train ticket. There's a family waitin' fer yeh once yeh get there. Lots of red hair, can' miss 'em."

"Thanks Hagrid, for everything," Kate said and gave him a firm hug. Hagrid smiled and closed the door.

The driver was silent, not making any attempt to speak to her as they drove. He did notice, however, when she began to hum to herself and Hazel, turning to glance at her in his mirror when they stopped. She didn't notice his gaze as she was too busy stroking the kitten on her lap.

It was ten thirty by the time they arrived. The driver got out and put her trunk on a trolley, wished her a good day, and drove away. With Hedwig on her shoulder and Hazel on her head, she walked into the station with a smile. She hummed a bouncy tune, reflecting the general happiness of her mood.

Once she stepped into the station she craned her neck and looked around for the red headed family Hagrid had mentioned. They were easy to spot, even if they hadn't had vibrant red hair. Two twins, who were identical down to the last freckle, spotted her first as she made her way over.

Kate had the image of a clan of bright red people before she seemed to have come face to face with them. A plump woman, kindly looking woman stood in the center of the group. Behind her, as if trying to hide and get a good look at her was a small girl with big brown eyes. On either side of the woman were the twins, grinning widely at her in a generally welcoming matter. To the woman's right, a boy wearing horn beam glasses and a shiny badge on his jumper took in her appearance, Hedwig, and Hazel, gave a snort of his nose as if he found something wrong. The last of the "clan" was staring at her with wide eyes and an open mouth.

"Hello there, dear. Hagrid told you to expect us?" Kate nodded. "Good, well then, straight to it. To get onto the platform, as you must have noticed nine and three quarters doesn't exist at the moment, you have to go straight through the barrier between nine and ten. It's simple really but you best take it at a run if you're nervous."

She swallowed and looked at the very solid looking barrier.

"Percy, be a dear and show her how it's done."

The boy with the silver badge on his chest took his trolley regally and began to walk at the barrier. Once he got there he just vanished.

"You see? Nothing to it. Now go along and I'll be right behind you."

Kate smiled gratefully at the woman and began to walk briskly toward the barrier. Feeling a bit nervous, she was soon jogging and then running. Right when she was about to hit the barrier she closed her

eyes, ready for the crash as her trolley hit a solid wall. But no crash came and she kept running. She opened her eyes and had to skid to a halt for she had run through the wall and almost hit some poor old lady on the other side.

Hedwig gave an indignant hoot and Hazel meowed loudly at the sudden stop. Behind her, the twins appeared followed by the woman, the little girl, and the last boy.

"Thank you," Kate said with a smile as the woman came up to her.

"No problem...um..."

"Kate. Kate Potter."

The woman did a double take, her eyes flicked to where her scar should have been. The boy gave a squeak and hid behind his mother and the girl gave an excited, quiet squeal.

"Ginny, behave yourself and Ronald, she's not going to hurt you. I'm Molly Weasley dear, it's a pleasure to meet you," she said but hesitated as if she wanted to ask something else. "I...well this is silly, but I was told you had a scar on your forehead..."

"Oh! I do. I'm just hiding it right now. I don't want people to stare at me too much at the moment."

"I don't blame you, dear." Just then, the five minute boarding call went out. "Oh my! We better hurry!"

It was a frantic dash for empty compartments all over the train. Kate didn't really feel up to fighting her way to a seat, walked all the way to the back of the train. At the last car, she began to try to drag her trunk up the steps, but only succeeded and dropping it on her foot.

"Need a hand?" someone asked.

"Yes, please!"

"I'm Fred..."

“And I’m George.”

“We heard what you told mum and-”

“We’re very surprised she didn’t smother you with kindness back there.”

“You got lucky.”

“Yeah, close shave.”

“Could have died.”

“You deserve a medal.”

The twins did this all as they lugged her trunk up into the empty compartment she’d spotted and tied down her things. By the time they were done, she was hard pressed to suppress her giggles at their antics.

“Fred! George!”

“Well, that’s us...”

“Our keeper bellows.”

“Shall we, my dear brother?”

“We shall.” And the two left her compartment with arms around each other’s shoulders.

Kate found that a very good time to fall into a fit of giggles. A few minutes later, she had gathered control of herself and the train began to move. Since she didn’t have anything better to do, she pulled out Curses and Counter-curses and began to thumb through it, humming idly to herself as she read up on the Jelly-Legs curse.

The compartment door slid open, revealing a bushy-haired girl with slightly buck teeth. “I was looking for a compartment and I just heard...was that you?” she asked rather quickly.

Kate nodded uncertainly. "That was really beautiful," the girl said as she stared at her. "Oh! Where are my manners? I'm Hermione Granger," she said, sticking out her hand.

"Katherine Potter," Kate replied, taking the offered hand and shaking it. Hermione stared at her again before shaking herself out of it.

"Are you really? I don't see your scar. I thought she—you had one."

"Oh, I'm just hiding it. I didn't want people staring at me out on the platform."

"Hiding it? How?"

"Like this." Kate concentrated and her scar returned to her forehead.

"Oh wow! How'd you do that?"

Kate smiled mischievously. "I'm a metamorphmagus."

"A what?" Kate giggled, which only deepened Hermione's confusion. "What? What's so funny?"

"N-nothing! It's just, that's the same thing I said to the man who works in Flourish and Blott's." Kate went on to explain everything she learned about metamorphmagi during her stay at the Leaky Cauldron and even demonstrated some hair color changes.

The two new friends spent the time until lunch talking about Hogwarts and generally their lives. Hermione was shocked to hear about her mistreatment at the orphanage but was immediately calmed when she explained that Mitchell was taking care of it.

"But...you seem so cheerful and carefree...It just doesn't seem right if you grew up like that."

Kate merely shrugged. "I'm not as carefree as you think." A haunted look crossed her face that she quickly squashed and turned to a small smile.

The lunch trolley came by and between the two of them; they bought two bags of Bertie Bott's Every Flavored Beans, a handful of Chocolate Frogs, and several Cauldron Cakes.

They were interrupted shortly after that by the compartment door opening. "Is it true? What they've been saying all down the train? That Katherine Potter is in this compartment?" a pale blonde boy drawled as he stepped into the compartment with two cronies (that was the only way she could describe them).

"Oh...it's *you*," he sneered. Kate remembered him from Madame Malkin's. How he had looked at her as if she would dirty him if she touched him. Kate threw Hermione a confused look before turning back to the boy.

"It looks like you've cleaned up but you're still wearing that muggle filth," he continued, gesturing toward her jeans and T-shirt. "Anyway, I'm Draco Malfoy," he said, sticking out his hand, albeit reluctantly.

Kate simply stared at it for a moment before looking at Draco again. "Why do you think I'll shake your hand after what you just said?"

Draco simply stared at her as if he couldn't believe anyone could refuse him. She simply continued to stare until he withdrew his hand. "So you've chosen then..." he muttered to himself before giving himself a shake and smirking. "It looks like you two have a bit too much to eat there. I don't think you'll mind us sharing a bit."

Kate and Hermione stood up and were about to protest when footsteps were heard outside. Fred and George stopped just outside the compartment and took a moment to take in the situation before twin grins formed on their faces.

"Malfoy! How good to see you! We've been wondering where you've been hiding," George exclaimed, throwing an arm around Malfoy's shoulder while Fred snagged his two cronies.

"What's this? Bothering two fine ladies! Malfoy! I expected better of you!" Fred cried indignantly.

"I guess this means..."

“That we get to test...”

“Our new toy today.”

“And what perfect little guinea pigs they are too,” Fred said with a slight maniacal glint in his eyes.

Malfoy looked terrified and struggled out of George’s grip and then dashed out of the compartment, his cronies following closely behind him. The compartment filled with laughter and even Hermione, who Kate knew to like rules a little too much, was giggling quietly.

“What were you going to do to them?” Kate asked with interest.

“Dunno...but whatever it is, we’ll be sure you’ll be able to see it.”

“Aww...I wanted to help...”

“What’s this!” Fred exclaimed.

“Another mischief maker in the making!” George responded.

“Forge, I believe this is the happiest day of my life.”

“I know what you mean Gred.”

“She must be initiated.”

“Yes, but how?”

“Malfoy...hmmm...let us work this out after the feast.”

“Katherine, my dear...”

“We will be in touch.” And with that the twins left the room, leaving two very confused girls.

The countryside the train was traveling through became rougher as they went, fading from fields to untamed grassy areas and then to sporadic forests.

"We should get into our robes," Hermione said after a while. Kate agreed, took her robe out of her trunk, and pulled it on. The two once again fell into silence as they both became absorbed in their books. Kate was humming once again and absently petting Hazel who had taken up residence on her lap.

The sky darkened outside but the girls took no notice. By this time, both Kate and Hermione were practicing color changing spells on various pieces of trash in their compartment. The conductor up front announced that they would be arriving at Hogwarts in five minutes time and that everyone was to leave their belongings on the train.

Kate and Hermione picked up the trash around their compartment and then packed away their spell books. Kate then put Hedwig in her rarely used cage. She also tried to put Hazel away but she refused to go into her basket. So Kate put the stubborn kitten on her head where it gave a satisfied meow.

The train came to a stop with an almighty lurch. Compartments all over the train began to slide open as people disembarked into the night. Kate and Hermione followed and joined the flow and made it out with only minor pushing.

Outside, Kate saw the large shadow that was Hagrid calling out, "Firs' Years over here! All Firs' years this way! Alright there, Kate?" he said when he saw her. She grinned as he continued calling out to the first years.

"That all of yeh? Well then, let's go!" Hagrid led them down a slippery, uneven path. The two girls leaned on each other to keep their balance as they kept slipping on unseen rocks or tripping on tree roots.

"Yeh'll be gettin' yer first sight 'o Hogwarts jus' 'round this bend," Hagrid called out.

A loud "Ooooooh," echoed over the large, black lake the path had ended at. Beyond the lake, sitting on its own little mountain, was a magnificent castle with many turrets and towers.

“No more’n four to a boat,” Hagrid called out, breaking everyone’s trance and pointing to a small fleet of little boats against the shore. Kate and Hermione got into one and were followed by Ron and a round faced boy.

The girls introduced themselves and learned that the boy’s name was Neville. Ron still didn’t seem to have the ability to speak and Kate had a sneaking suspicion as to why that was.

“Everyone in? Right then—FORWARD!” The tiny fleet of boats then glided out onto the lake smoothly. No one was talking as they made their way toward the cliffs. “Heads down!” Hagrid called as the first boats reached the cliff. Everyone ducked under the wall of ivy hanging down and then raised their heads to see the dark tunnel they were sailing down which eventually opened up into a great underground harbor.

They clambered out onto the pebbles as Hagrid checked the boats. “Oi! You there! This your toad!” Hagrid called out.

“Trevor!” Neville called out as he ran over to collect his toad.

Hagrid led them up a passageway in the rock which eventually opened up onto smooth grass right in the shadow of the castle.

“Everyone here? You there, still got yer toad?”

After a general agreement that everyone was still there, Hagrid raised his huge fist and knocked on the great oak doors three times with a resounding boom.

Chapter Four: The Sorting

The doors swung open almost at once to reveal a stern looking witch that Kate recognized as Professor McGonagall. Now that she had more time to study her, she seemed a bit...cross. At just about everyone. Kate vowed that she would do everything in her power to stay on McGonagall's good side.

"The Firs' years, Professor," Hagrid said.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I'll take them from here."

McGonagall opened the doors wide and led them into the entrance hall. Kate was astounded by the size of it. The walls were lit with torches like they had at Gringotts and even with all the torches; the ceiling was too high to make out in the darkness. A marble staircase, glowing a gentle orange color, led up to the upper floors.

They were led across the flagstone floor, past a pair of doors that she could hear the drone of voices behind—the rest of the school she thought—and into a doorway off to the side of the hall. They crowded in, standing much closer to each other than they would have done normally. Kate and Hermione looked nervously at each other as they waited for something to happen.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," Professor McGonagall said. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room."

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule-breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours."

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting."

"I shall return when we are ready for you," said Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly."

Kate and Hermione looked at each other, their nervousness increased by the Professor's speech.

"Do you have any idea on how we're sorted?" Kate whispered to Hermione.

"No. It wasn't in *Hogwarts, A History*. That was really very disappointing."

Nearby, Ron was telling Neville about what his brothers said they had to do. "Fred said it was some sort of test and that it hurt a lot. Dunno if he was joking though..."

Kate giggled and Hermione gave her a questioning glance. "I don't think Fred or George could say something without joking if they wanted to."

"But what if it is a test? Maybe we have to do something from one of our books. Show that we read them over the summer," Hermione said frantically.

"Hermione! Relax. I don't think they'll make kids like us, that haven't ever done any magic," Kate grinned, "and have us do something in front of the entire school. It wouldn't be fair."

Even though she was feeling a bit uncomfortable with all the people pressed around her, Kate knew that once it came time to act, she'd be able to do it. Like when she had jumped on the bus earlier that summer. Normal Kate, the one that lives everyday life, would never have dreamed of getting on a bus.

Her thoughts were cut short thought by several screams that echoed harshly about the small room. Hermione shook her arm frantically and pointed at the opposite wall, an ecstatic smile on her face.

“Look Kate! Ghosts!”

Hermione’s outburst drew the attention of the ghosts hovering above their heads. They had been talking about someone named Peeves, but Kate hadn’t been paying attention to much of it.

“New students!” said a ghost that looked like a fat friar. “About to be Sorted?” There were sporadic nods around the room.

“Hope to see you in Hufflepuff! My old house, you know.”

“Move along now,” said a sharp voice. “The Sorting Ceremony’s about to start.”

Professor McGonagall was standing in the doorway, looking intently at the ghosts. The ghosts gave her some sign of compliance and began to float through the wall.

“Now, form a line and follow me,” she said.

Kate gave herself a mental shake before she began to walk behind McGonagall. Deciding that now was not the best time to be hiding her scar; she concentrated and let it fade back into view.

McGonagall led them out of the little room and back into the entrance hall. She pushed open the double doors to the Great Hall and proceeded to guide them to the front of the room.

It was huge! Four long tables were lined up so they could walk between them. At the head of the room, a fifth table stood slightly above the rest where all the Professors sat. The ceiling above them looked as if it opened up to the night sky, but Kate quickly learned it was enchanted from Hermione as she whispered it to her.

Professor McGonagall stopped just in front of the Head table and set a stool down in front of them. She asked them to form a line behind the stool and to face the school. Kate ended up standing right in the center of the line, just behind the stool. If anything could have made her feel like she was in the spotlight, that was it.

McGonagall came back from wherever she disappeared to and set a dirty, pointed wizard's hat on the stool. Kate gave it a skeptical look, thinking about what they had to do with the hat. The Hall was silent as everyone stared at the hat. Kate looked down just in time to see it twitch. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth and then the hat began to sing:

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart,

Their daring, nerve, and chivalry

Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,

Where they are just and loyal,

*Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
If you've a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.
So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in a flap!
You're in safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a Thinking cap!"*

Kate simply stared at the hat while the hall burst into applause. Who ever heard of a hat that could sing? Then the hat bowed to each of the tables before becoming still again. She simply shook her head at the nonsense of it all and waited politely for something to happen.

McGonagall finally stepped forward with a long roll of parchment in her hands. "When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted. Abbott, Hannah!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!" the hat shouted and the table on the right exploded with cheers. Kate let her mind wander, her gaze never settled and more often than not, it ended up on the ceiling. She hummed to herself softly as the hat called out the names of houses, although she didn't bother to notice the people's names.

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

“GRYFFINDOR!”

“SLYTHERIN!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“GRYFFINDOR!”

“GRYFFINDOR!” Kate watched as Hermione took off the hat and bounded down to the cheering table.

It went on and on like this, the first years putting on the hat and then leaving. Although Neville Longbottom actually ran off with the hat and had to bring it back. After that, Kate fell back into her humming and gazing. She was so out of it that she missed the first couple times when Professor McGonagall called her name.

“POTTER, KATHERINE!” McGonagall yelled, her voice rising in volume as she tried to gain Kate’s attention. It was Fred and George Weasley, however, that finally brought her back to reality.

“OI, KATE! PUT ON THE HAT SO WE CAN EAT!” they yelled together. The hall burst out laughing causing her to blush madly, having just become aware of her surroundings. She smiled apologetically to Professor McGonagall who looked just about ready to spit fire.

Kate approached the stool quickly with her head down and crammed the hat on her head. It was so large that it would have gone over her shoulders if it was long enough.

“What’s this? Is there a cat in here too!” asked a tiny voice. Kate giggled. “Never mind that, down to business. Hmmm...quite a bit of courage in here and a prankster to the core I see! Let us all hope you don’t team up with those Weasley twins, we wouldn’t want to give

poor Mr. Filch any more trouble...My dear girl! How can you be so attuned to all the houses! “

Kate merely giggled again and shrugged. “Don’t you shrug at me! You’re making this far too difficult for an old hat. Ah! I believe I have ruled out one house! You’re no Slytherin, even though you posses some—interesting abilities...Well, even though you’re shy, Hufflepuff is not the house for you. So...a choice between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. I seem to remember giving your mother that option and I believe it will suit you well for you to be in—GRYFFINDOR!”

Kate smiled and before she took off the hat said, “You’re very strange...”

The Gryffindor table seemed to be beside themselves with the luck of having “gotten Potter.”

Fred and George were currently doing a little jig to the tune, “We got Potter! We got Potter!”

Kate quickly sat down next to Hermione and pulled Hazel out of her hair and set her in her lap.

“What took so long with your Sorting?” Hermione whispered as the hat began to rapidly sort students again.

“The hat was a bit...confused. For one, I had Hazel on my head. And then it didn’t know what to make of my personality. So, he finally stuck me in my mum’s old house.”

“Oh...well I guess that’s one way to do it,” Hermione said thoughtfully before she brought her eyes up as if she had just remembered something. “Kate, I overheard some of the students talking. They think you’re crazy.”

Kate looked at her skeptically and then looked down the table to see several people watching her.

“Why would they think that?”

"Well...Professor McGonagall had to call your name three times before Fred and George got your attention. Before that, you were smiling absently and just, looking around at everything."

"I was humming," Kate said defensively.

Just then, the hall seemed to go quiet and the two girls looked up to see a man with long white hair stand up. "That's Professor Dumbledore..." whispered Hermione.

"Welcome! Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you!"

"O...kay...And people think *I'm* crazy!" Kate asked in disbelief as Dumbledore sat down. Hermione didn't get a chance to say anything as the plates in front of them filled with food of all kinds.

Kate dug in with relish, having only a limited pallet from her days at the orphanage. She didn't talk to anyone but was forced to occasionally give a sample of meat to Hazel who would paw at her face until she couldn't ignore her anymore. Of course, Kate had the extreme misfortune to look up just as Gryffindor's resident ghost pulled on his ear and swung his head off his shoulders. Kate shuddered and returned to her eating, albeit at a slower pace.

The plates in front of them cleared only to be filled once again by the desserts.

"Oh...I don't think I can eat any more..." Hermione said as she toyed with the treacle tart in front of her.

"Don't know what you're talking about, Hermione," Kate responded as she eagerly dug into her plate of dessert. She'd never been allowed to eat much at the orphanage. None of them had.

Eventually, her appetite subsided and she turned to listening to Percy give Hermione the run down on the professors.

"...And that's Professor Quirrell," Percy said, indicating the man who was wearing a very absurd turban. He had his head facing away from

her while he was talking to a greasy haired, hook nosed man with sallow skin.

Just as she was looking, the man looked past Quirrell's head and his eyes met hers. A sharp pain lanced through her forehead as the man's face registered absolute shock.

"Ow!" Kate cried, holding her head in her hands and causing Hazel to hiss softly as her perch was disturbed.

"What is it?" Hermione asked curiously.

"My head...ow...felt like someone just tried to pry it open along my scar..." she replied while sending glances over to the Head Table. "Who's that teacher talking to Professor Quirrell?" Kate asked Hermione.

"That's Snape, the Potions Master. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah...fine." Hermione shook her head and began to nibble on a doughnut.

Finally, the tables cleared and Dumbledore stood up.

"Ahem—just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you."

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that." Dumbledore gave a ghost of a smile to the Weasley twins.

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors."

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact madam Hooch."

"And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die

a very painful death.” Kate looked skeptically at the Headmaster but something in his demeanor told her he wasn’t joking.

“And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!” Kate looked up with anticipation, ever eager to sing. “Everyone pick their favorite tune and off we go!”

Kate covered her ears in stared around in horror at the horrible sounds coming from every direction while Hazel let out a long, piercing meow. But still the school “sang:”

“Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warth Hogwarts,

Teach us something please,

Whether we be old and bald

Or young with scabby knees,

Our heads could do with filling

With some interesting stuff,

For now they’re bare and full of air,

Dead flies and bits of fluff,

So teach us things worth knowing,

Bring back what we’ve forgot,

Just do you best, we’ll do the rest,

And learn until our brains all rot.”

“Ow...my head...that has got to be the worst...ugh!” Kate mumbled into her hands.

“Ah, music,” Dumbledore said, whipping his eyes. “A magic beyond all we do here! Now, bedtime. Off you trot!”

Kate merely glared at the Headmaster. "There is no way on this green earth that that—that noise—could be called music!" she seethed as they followed Percy out of the Great Hall. Hermione wisely didn't speak up.

In her own private fury, she wasn't really paying attention to where they were going. She dimly noticed that the portraits around them were moving and whispering to each other and that several times, Percy led them through doorways concealed behind tapestries. They climbed steps, higher and higher, until Kate thought they must have been in the tallest tower by then when they stopped.

They had stopped in a large corridor, for what reason only became apparent to her as she caught sight of a bundle of walking sticks hovering in the air.

"Peeves..." Percy hissed. "He's a poltergeist. Peeves—show yourself!" he barked. A loud, rude sound, like the air being let out of a balloon, answered.

"Do you want me to go fetch the Bloody Baron?"

There was a loud pop, and a little man with wicked, dark eyes and a wide mouth appeared, floating cross-legged in the air, clutching the walking sticks.

"Ooooooh! Ickle Firsties! What fun!" Peeves cackled. He swooped at them, pelting several of the random first years with walking sticks. Kate stumbled backwards as one hit her in the chest.

"Go away, Peeves, or the Baron'll hear about this, I mean it!"

Peeves stuck out his tongue and vanished, dropping the walking sticks on their collective heads. Kate had to reflexively grab one before it smashed Hazel.

"You want to watch out for Peeves," Percy said as they set off again. "The Bloody Baron's the only one who can control him, he won't even listen to us prefects. Well, here we are."

They came to a stop in front of a portrait of an extremely fat lady wearing a very pink dress. Kate shuddered just looking at it.

“Password?”

“Caput Draconis,” said Percy, and the portrait swung open to reveal a round hole in the wall. Kate filled the password away as they scrambled through the hole. The Gryffindor Common Room was a very cozy, round room with lots of overly stuffed armchairs and couches with tables to do one’s homework on.

Percy directed the girls to the left and boys to the right. Kate, Hermione, and the other girls in their year dragged their feet up the staircase to their dormitory, which ended up being at the top of the tower.

There were four four-poster beds hung with deep red, velvet curtains in their room and their trunks were already situated. Two full body mirrors were situated at either end of the room and a large window faced the door which overlooked the dark grounds below.

All of the girls sleepily got ready for bed, not talking at all. Kate pulled her hangings open and was just about to collapse on her bed when she saw Hazel sprawled out in the middle of it.

“Oh no you don’t...” She picked the cat up and flopped into bed, pulling the covers up to her neck. Hazel found a comfortable perch next to her ear and snuggled into her. Her kitten began to purr softly. It was a comforting to have that warmth against her and the soft purring lulled her to sleep.

Chapter Five: The Potions Master

“There, look.”

“Where?”

“Next to the kid with the bushy hair.”

“That short girl with black hair?”

“Did you see her face?”

“Did you see her scar?”

Whispers followed Kate everywhere and she was regretting heavily the decision to not hide her scar. Hermione had talked her into it, saying that she might as well get it over with. Of course that didn't stop her from wanting to blast the next person that mentioned anything that remotely regarded her scar or her fame. She would have by then too if she had known how. That really hadn't been on her summer early preparation list.

This, however, turned out to be one of her least worrisome problems. The first and foremost was trying to find her classes. Especially with all the people gawking at her at every turn. Luckily, she had Hermione's level head, so they made it to class on time with no trouble.

And then there was Peeves, always on the look out for a student that was late for class. The little poltergeist would do everything in his power to hold them up in the corridors, trip them on the stairs, or scare the living daylights out of them.

Peeves had decided that, since Kate and Hermione hadn't been late to any classes yet, he'd get some revenge. Possibly some vendetta he had against studious students. So, he decided to attack them as they were exiting their first Charms class.

Kate had been having an exceptionally bad day with all of the staring and whispering that she was about to snap. Then, to top it all off with a wonderfully ripe cherry, Peeves showed up and showered both

Hermione and herself with chalk dust. Kate was, to say the least, displeased. Well, livid would have been a better term for it. Thus, this explained why Peeves the Poltergeist was floating around the school pink for the rest of the day. Fred and George even went out of their way to congratulate her on such a fine prank.

Unfortunately for the intrepid young prankster, there was someone out there more frightening than Peeves. Far more frightening. Argus Filch, the caretaker. After breakfast on the first day, he was making random inspections on student's bags for any "contraband." Of course, as luck would have it, Kate's was one of the bags he checked. The moment the bag opened, Hazel exploded from her confines and latched herself onto Filch's face. He had to spend the morning in the Hospital Wing to be treated for minor lacerations.

To make things worse, or in most people's opinions, better, Mrs. Norris attempted to avenge her master by attacking Hazel as she was being counseled by Kate. Not knowing about Mrs. Norris' importance to the general police force around Hogwarts, Kate had given the cat a swift kick after it tried to claw up her leg. It confused her to no end when people all around the entrance hall began to applaud.

Now that the worrisome problems of her avoiding people, avoiding Peeves, and avoiding a detention have been dealt with, she moved onto the classes.

It soon became apparent as to why they needed a telescope at Hogwarts for no one would be able to pass Astronomy without one. At midnight on every Wednesday, they learned the names of different stars and the movements of the planets. Then, three times a week, they went out to the greenhouses behind the castle to study Herbology with the dumpy little Head of Hufflepuff, Professor Sprout. They learned how to take care of the most fascinating, and sometimes disgusting, plants and fungi and found out what they were used for in the modern magical world.

But, their fun was cut short, as every school had to have at least one boring class. This one was History of Magic, which was taught by a ghost. Professor Binns had been very old when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff room fire and got up the next morning to teach,

leaving his body behind. Binns droned on as they took notes and it seemed that only Kate and Hermione could resist the drowsy fate their classmates were suffering.

Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was by far the smallest person Kate had ever seen. He had to stand on top of a pile of books to see over his desk for Merlin's sake! And for some reason, Kate's fame could not be escaped, even for a professor. When he called her name while taking role, he got so excited that he fell off his pile of books onto the floor, where the books proceeded to land unceremoniously on top of him.

The class had burst out laughing while Kate let her head fall to the desk with a dull *thump*. Hermione seemed to be the only person in the room who was remotely concerned about the Professor's health as she was the only one to get up and help the tiny man from the pile of books.

The rest of the class was spent on an introduction to Charms, in which they began simple Color-Changing Charms. With that bit of extra practice, Kate and Hermione mastered the spell quickly. Professor Flitwick was so impressed he gave them both a point each for Gryffindor.

And then came Transfiguration. Oh, was she right when she thought McGonagall was strict. The first thing the professor did when everyone was seated was give them a talking to.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," she said. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Then, McGonagall proceeded to turn her desk into a pig and back again. Kate and Hermione were literally at the edge of their seats, eager to get on with it. Most of their other classmates gave them disdainful looks, muttering under their breaths "Know-it-alls." Unfortunately, they wouldn't be getting to such advanced transformations.

After taking some very complicated notes, Professor McGonagall handed out matchsticks and instructed them to try to turn them into

needles. Working together, Kate and Hermione successfully transformed their matches into silvery needles and both received one of the few smiles McGonagall handed out and glares from the rest of the class.

Yet, the class everyone was looking forward to most was Defense Against the Dark Arts. As if fate had conspired against them, Professor Quirrell was a bit of a joke at teaching. In fact, Kate was half tempted to skive off the class after the first five minutes.

"How can you think that? You can't skive class! What if something important comes up?" Hermione whispered to her.

"It's easy! All I have to do is not pay attention to this bore and then I won't have any problems skiving his class. I think I'll learn more on my own anyway."

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Go from being such a good student to being such a troublemaker?"

"Dunno...I guess it's in my blood."

But Kate decided not to skive off class that day, although she was seriously thinking of doing it for the next Defense class. In fact, she didn't get into any real mischief until Friday, when Fred and George thought it would be a good time for her "initiation."

The twins snatched her away from Hermione as they were entering the Great Hall and took her off to the side, hiding in a small alcove.

"Okay," Fred started.

"Here's what we want you to do," George continued.

"We want you-"

"To curse Malfoy-"

"Red and gold. Like a Gryffindor."

"That's it?" Kate asked incredulously

"That's it!" Fred hissed indignantly.

"You're only a first year..."

"Who has a very limited access to the spell she can cast..."

"We're trying to make this easy on you..."

"But, if you want..."

"Try the whole table."

Kate glanced into the Great Hall again and took stock of the Slytherin table. "Piece of pie," she said smugly. Fred and George stared at her and then began to laugh.

"We were right about this one, dear brother."

"I know what you mean; one real prankster to the core."

The twins meandered into the hall and took up seats at the Gryffindor table to watch the show. Kate thought for a moment, knowing the only way she'd be able to charm the entire table and all its inhabitants, was if she touched it. Then, she had an idea. She smiled impishly and reached into her bag, pulling out a sleeping black ball of fur.

"Hazel...Oh come on, wake up! You never sleep this early in the morning." The kitten had apparently wanted to mess with her, for its eyes popped open and it meowed smugly. "Ugh! You're so infuriating sometimes!" she said loudly. Some of the students going in for breakfast began whispering fervently behind their hands. "I am *not* crazy!" she yelled after them, causing them to speed up. Kate sighed and turned back to her kitten, who was looking at her with a curious expression.

"That was all your fault you know." Hazel simply began to wash herself primly. "Hey, I have a job for you!" The kitten looked up at her with her large, hazel eyes, all ears to what she had planned. After the

quickly whispered instructions, Hazel jumped out of Kate's hands and dashed through the doors of the Great Hall.

"ARG! You infuriating cat! Get back here!" she yelled after the kitten several seconds later. Hazel skidded to a halt directly underneath the Slytherin table and Kate followed her with a similar maneuver. As she scooped up her kitten, she tapped her wand against the table bottom and scooted out. "Heehee...sorry about that. Won't happen again," she told everyone in the Hall. They were all giving her strange looks. She hazarded a glance at the Head Table and saw Dumbledore smiling at her with his twinkly eyes.

Before anyone could accuse her of the changes she performed on the Slytherin's, she dashed across the Hall and plopped herself next to Hermione, who was conveniently seated across from Fred and George. The twins looked as if they were going to explode with laughter any second now but they decided to wait until the Slytherins noticed their predicament.

It was a priceless moment. All of the Slytherins seemed to have realized they were red and gold at the same moment, as they all yelled in surprise as one, single minded, low IQ entity. The entire Hall burst out laughing and Fred and George fell off the bench to roll on the floor while clutching their sides. Hermione and Kate were giggling quietly. Kate did this only to keep suspicion off her and it wasn't in Hermione's nature to laugh at other people's expenses.

The Hall was called back into order by Dumbledore waving his wand and returning the Slytherins to normal but Kate couldn't help but notice him give her an extra big smile as he sat down again.

Suddenly, the Weasley twins were beside her, shaking her hands and congratulating her on a job well done.

"Kate, that was beautiful!"

"Couldn't have done it better ourselves."

"The touch with the cat..."

"Priceless! And before that..."

“Everyone heard you yelling at that...”

“Group of Ravenclaws.”

“Not crazy indeed!”

“Besides...”

“Who would expect...”

“A little girl like you...”

“To pull a prank so big?” The twins finished together. It took them less than a second to figure out that they had something wrong but neither had the opportunity to get out of the way before they were hit by identical hexes.

While they had been standing in their mad rush to escape, Kate had hit them both with well placed Jelly-Legs hexes, causing them to wobble unsteadily out of the Hall to gales of laughter at the twins getting a taste of their own medicine.

Shortly thereafter, the mail arrived and Kate received her first letter while she was at Hogwarts. Hedwig came swooped down and landed neatly on her shoulder, dropping a sheaf of parchment into her lap.

Dear Kate,

I know you get Friday afternoons off, so would you like to come and have a cup of tea with me around three? I want to hear all about your first week. Send us an answer back with Hedwig.

Hagrid

Kate quickly dug through her bag, withdrew a quill, and quickly wrote out an answer on the back of the parchment and sent it off with Hedwig.

Yeah, sounds great. See you at three.

Kate

Hermione, who had read over her shoulder, asked, "Can I come? I've been wondering about Hagrid and I'd love to meet him."

"Sure, I don't think he'll mind. The more the merrier I think," Kate replied before digging into her breakfast. She still shocked Hermione. The bushy haired girl wondered futilely about how such a small person could eat so much. This was true for just about every other Gryffindor that had witnessed her eat. She was indeed small, almost a head shorter than Hermione, the shortest in their year after her.

Kate had thought there was something funny about Snape when she had noticed him looking at her at the start-of-term banquet. Now she *knew* there was something funny about him.

That day, during Double Potions, Snape had started off by going down the call list to make sure everyone was there. Like Professor Flitwick, he paused at her name. He gave her that strange look, like he recognized her from somewhere, but that quickly faded into his usual sneer as he began to lecture.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making," he began in no more than a whisper. He, like Professor McGonagall, was able to keep a class under control with his mere presence. "As there is little foolish wandwaving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses...I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death—if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Kate and Hermione gave him identical glares, clearly informing the professor that they were *not* in any way, dunderheads. The class sat silently, either eager or dreading the beginning of the lesson.

"Potter!" snapped Snape. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Kate, caught off guard by the sudden question, glanced at Snape for a moment, seeing once again that strange look, as if he expected something of her and knew she should be able to come up with the

answer. Hermione's hand had shot up into the air immediately, informing Kate that she really should have known this answer as soon as the question had been asked.

Come on...think Kate...Asphodel and wormwood...asphodel and wormwood...Ah ha!

"A sleeping potion, sir, commonly known as the Draught of the Living Dead," she replied crisply after only a few seconds of delay.

Snape looked slightly surprised and a faint smile tugged at his lips.

"Very good, Miss Potter, but let's try again shall we. Luck is not a thing I hold highly in my class," he said, his sneer back in place so quickly, she thought she might have imagined the smile. "Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

"The stomach of a goat, sir," Kate answered without hesitation and before Hermione's hand could shoot up into the air again.

This time, she was sure she didn't imagine the smile but he still had one last question for her that had her stumped for a while.

"What is the difference, Miss Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

Hermione's hand once again shot up into the air as Kate tried to reason her way through the question and call up the things she read in her potions book.

"Monkshood and wolfsbane...Well, wolfsbane is...yes...and then...Monkshood...Monkshood, monkshood, monkshood...Ah! They're the same, just different names," she said after some mental and verbal reasoning.

"Very good, Miss Potter. I will award you with one point if you can tell me a third name for the plant," Snape said, his eyes clearly glittering with anticipation.

"It's also known as...as..."

“Yes?”

“As...aconite?”

Snape truly smiled at her and she had to admit, it was an improvement to his usual sneer. “Very good. One point to Gryffindor.”

The entire dungeon was silent. No one had ever heard of Snape giving Gryffindor a single point. Ever. This would be something of a legend in no time. Katherine Potter earns a point in Potions. Even the Slytherins were flabbergasted. Malfoy looked beside himself with confusion and just about the only person on the Slytherin side of the room that wasn't glaring in her general direction was Blaise Zabini.

After some meticulous notes, Snape had them all start on a simple potion to cure boils. The Potions Master split them into pairs and they set to work crushing snake fangs and tried nettles. Snape didn't seem to have let his good natured act toward Kate influence his personality toward the other Gryffindors. He swept around the room, making scathing comments to everyone, although he couldn't find anything to fault Hermione on. When he passed Kate, he peered down into her potion and gave her a smile before moving on.

“What did you do to get him on your side?” she heard whispered from behind her. It was Ron Weasley. He was working with Dean Thomas, another boy in their year, and their potion looked a little bit too yellow to be useful.

“I don't know,” she whispered back. “I really didn't do anything but answer his questions.”

Ron tried to engage her in some more covert whispers but she shushed him, insisting on concentrating on her potion.

She glanced up, her potion in its final stages, just in time to see Neville getting ready to add his porcupine quills. “No Neville! Not the-”

BOOM!

“...Quills...”

Neville had looked up just in time to see Kate trying to frantically grab the quills away from him. In his surprise, he dropped them straight into his cauldron, which began to bubble and froth dangerously. Kate pulled back just in time to see the thing explode, showering Neville with green slime. Angry red boils began to spring up all over his skin as he whimpered with pain.

“Potter!” Kate winced. There went that point. “One more point to Gryffindor for attempting to stop this buffoon’s attempt at potion making,” Snape said, again to the classes astonishment.

“You, take him to the hospital wing,” the professor snapped to Seamus Finnegan, the boy which Neville was working with and whose cauldron he had melted.

All of the first year Gryffindors were giving her odd looks as they climbed away from the potions after the grueling class had ended. She was being surrounded again, but this time it had nothing to do with her scar.

“How did you do that?”

“Yeah! Snape never gives Gryffindors points!”

“Why was he nice to you? My brothers have only told me horror stories about him.” This was Ron. He seemed to have overcome his inability to speak around her, at least for the moment.

“I don’t know...” was all she answered as the group entered the Great Hall for lunch. “Wait a sec, Hermione. We’re going down to Hagrid’s, remember?”

“Yes, but that’s hours away.”

“I know, I just don’t want to ruin our appetites. He’ll probably want to serve us something and seeing how big he is, it won’t be a very small serving.”

“I guess you’re right,” Hermione conceded. The two girls turned away from the waiting food in the Great Hall and hiked up to the common room to put their bags away and while away the time. They ended up

reading again in the common room as they waited for three 'o clock to draw nearer.

At ten to three, Kate stood up and set her book on a table. "We'd better get going; it's going to take us a while to get down to Hagrid's." Hermione agreed and they left the common room, making good time as they went down the hallways.

Hagrid lived in a small wooden house on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Outside his door was a large crossbow, complete with quiver and bolts, and a pair of huge galoshes. Kate knocked on the door, all the while pondering about what Hagrid's crossbow could be used for.

From inside, they could hear several loud barks and then Hagrid shouting, "Back, fang! Back!" Hagrid opened the door, holding back a gigantic boarhound by the collar.

The house was only a one room deal. Hams and pheasants hung from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire, and a massive bed with a patchwork quilt stood in the corner.

"Make yerselves at home," he said, releasing Fang, who lunged straight at Kate, licking her face from top to bottom. Hazel, who was on her head, gave out a startled squeak and darted down her back. Her kitten stopped halfway down, digging her claws into her robes and pricking her skin lightly.

"Ouch! Hazel, down!" To her surprise, the kitten did just that. She landed smoothly and was inspected by Fang as soon as she touched the floor.

"Hagrid, this is Hermione," Kate said, introducing her two friends.

"Good ter meet yeh," Hagrid replied, shaking Hermione's entire arm. He picked up the boiling kettle and poured the water into a large teapot. He then set cups that might have been considered buckets in front of them along with some rock cakes that looked like no more than shapeless lumps with raisins in them.

Both Kate and Hermione took one gratefully, but after trying to bite into one and nearly shattering all their teeth, they gingerly set them

down. The tea, however, was good and the two girls enjoyed sipping it while informing Hagrid about their first week of school.

The talk eventually turned to Potions that took place earlier that day.

“And he really gave her points Hagrid! From what I heard, that is supposedly impossible for Snape to do,” Hermione said, summing up the explanation.

“Did he really? Well, tha’s a new development. Never heard ‘o Snape givin’ Gryffindors points. Did yeh do anything to get on his good side, Kate?”

“No! All I did was answer some of his questions at the begging of class. And he kept giving me these weird looks. Like he recognized me or something,” Kate replied, running her hand through her hair.

“Well, I believe your mother was one ‘o the only people outside his house he spoke to when he was in school. That didn’t start until after their fifth year though. I guess that could explain it. You do look and act a lot like your mum did, Kate.”

Kate smiled weakly, remembering the only memory she had of her mother. She cast her eyes down to the table and caught sight of a newspaper clipping.

GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in at

Gringotts on 31 July, widely believed to be the

work of Dark wizards or witches unknown.

Gringotts goblins today insisted that nothing

had been taken. The vault that was searched had in

fact been emptied the same day

“But we’re not telling you what was in there, so

keep your noses out if you know what's good

for you," said a Gringotts spokesgoblin this afternoon.

"Hagrid," Kate said slowly. "This break-in. It happened on my birthday. What did you take out of the vault?"

"Can't tell yeh, Kate. Secret business, that is," Hagrid said in a serious tone of voice. "You two had better get back up to the school. It's almost dinner time."

Kate and Hermione left shortly thereafter, weighed down with rock cakes they had been too polite to refuse. Kate's mind kept wandering back to that grubby little package she had seen ever so briefly at the vault. Hagrid had been lucky to have emptied the vault when he did; otherwise, she was sure that package would have been stolen.

She lay awake late into the night, after all the other girls had gone to sleep. Her eyes were watching out the window where Hazel was sitting. Her kitten was sitting unusually still, staring out at the forest beyond the grounds. Deciding she wanted her warm neck-warmer back, Kate stood up and crossed the room.

She picked up her kitten and was about to turn back to bed when a blur of movement caught her eye. A huge, black, winged horse darted out of the forest, up around in a tight circle, and then back in. This all happened so fast that she thought perhaps she had imagined it.

Shaking her head slowly, Kate turned back toward her bed. "Maybe I *am* crazy like everyone thinks," she muttered to herself. "What about you? Do you think I'm crazy?" she asked Hazel, holding her up to look her in the eye. The kitten gave a tired yawn and a soft meow that she interpreted as a no. She smiled at her kitten and stroked her once.

Kate soon was in her bed with Hazel in her usual spot in the crook of her neck, purring softly. Sleep swiftly claimed her, throwing her into a strange dream with a dancing rat and a winged...something.

Chapter Six: Pranks, Flying, and A Midnight Duel

Kate had thought she and Melanie had done some wonderful pranks on Ms. Reinhardt. The pranking spree that seemed to sweep the school was far beyond the scope of any of Kate's wildest dreams, even though she participated in a fair few of them. Fred and George seemed to have built up confidence and sheer nerve with her Friday attack on the Slytherins.

The twins were especially delighted when she told them about her bag of Filibuster's, which she gladly added to the group pot of pranking items. And soon, over the course of the weekend and some of the following week, Fred and George showed Kate "the tricks of the trade." They taught her how to disappear in the castle, the shortest ways between each floor to the other, and even how to put together a satisfactory dungbomb trap.

No one was safe from the pranking trio, not even Kate herself. Well, it wasn't so much a prank as much as it was a way to keep her record clean. The twins saw her as a useful "secret weapon. As such, she was kept secret. The first prank that she "received" happened on Tuesday just before breakfast.

The twins used her ability to change her appearance and then simply charmed her clothes to finish the job. The end result was a shockingly, blaringly, pink Katherine Potter. When she entered the Great Hall that morning, every student, save Hermione, burst out laughing as she came in, screaming at the top of her lungs.

"FRED AND GEORGE WEASLEY!" rang through the halls of the castle and there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the shriek had been heard in Hogsmeade.

Suffice to say, there had never been such an amazing scolding, planned or otherwise, in the history of Hogwarts and everyone present in the Great Hall learned that Katherine Potter despised pink with a passion.

Every professor in the school was pranked before Wednesday, including Professor Dumbledore and Professor Binns. Everyone, with the exceptions of Kate, Fred, and George, was surprised to see their

Headmaster enter the Great Hall for breakfast on Wednesday with a bouquet of flowers for a hat. Dumbledore was a good sport about it and even handed a yellow rose to a flabbergasted Professor McGonagall.

Nobody could get past the fact, however, that the Slytherins were pranked the most. And even more often than not, the target was one Draco Malfoy.

Kate never thought she could hate someone as much as she did Malfoy, yet she did anyway. Now, Kate was a very kind person that was prone to giving people a chance before judging them and even with her encounter with Malfoy on the train, she was set on giving him his chance.

With the stupidity that she knew only the pale boy was capable of, he lost that chance before the second week of Hogwarts was over.

It was Thursday morning, the day of their first flying lesson. All of the first year Gryffindors were gathered at one end of the table, nervously chatting amongst themselves about the soon approaching flying lesson.

Everyone from wizarding families seemed to have some story or another to share about their adventures on brooms. Kate wasn't sure she believed half of what was told around the table, but some of her fellow Gryffindors readily lapped up the stories.

Hermione was boring everyone with trivial facts about quidditch she was quoting from *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Kate eventually snatched the book from her and ordered the poor girl to calm down. In fact, Kate seemed to be the only one *not* nervous about the upcoming lesson.

"I still don't know what you're so worried about Hermione. It's not like we're being graded on this. You're either good at flying or you're not," she said simply after tucking the book away in her bag.

That stopped Hermione's rantings but didn't keep her from wringing her hands nervously as she looked around with wide eyes. She literally jumped when the hundreds of owls soared into the room,

delivering the morning post. Kate watched Malfoy smirk impassively as he got another sweet basket from home. He cast a sneer in her direction as his eagle owl took flight again.

A barn owl dropped a small package in Neville's eggs. He opened the package, which was from his grandmother, excitedly. A glass ball the size of a marble rolled out onto the table. Inside, rolling slowly around, was a cloud of white smoke.

"What's that, Nev?" Kate asked curiously.

"It's a Remembrall!" he replied. "My Gran knows I always forget things. This tells you if there's something you've forgotten to do. You just hold it tight like this and if it turns red...uh-oh..." His face fell as the smoke turned a glowing red. "...you've forgotten something..."

Neville was busy trying to remember what he had forgotten when Malfoy, who was passing the Gryffindor table, snatched it out of his hand.

Kate and, to her surprise, Ron shot out of their seats. Ron looked ready to jump on the pale boy but Kate slowly drew her wand. She was really wishing for him to give her a reason to test the Banishing Hex, a stronger version of the Charm, she'd read about it and was itching to try it on the Slytherin. Unfortunately, Professor McGonagall, who could spot trouble faster than anyone in the school and knew of Kate's advanced studying topics, was there before Kate could think of saying the incantation.

"What's going on?" she snapped, looking from Kate to Malfoy and then to Ron.

"Malfoy's got my Remembrall," Neville said from his seat as he struggled to get up.

Glaring at Kate, Malfoy dropped the Remembrall on the table. "Just looking," he said before gesturing toward Crabbe and Goyle and making his way out of the Great Hall.

"Thanks for the back up, Ron," Kate said, throwing a small smile toward the red headed boy. Ron simply flushed crimson and began to

poke at his food without responding. She shrugged, threw a curious look at Hermione, and turned back to her breakfast.

At three thirty that afternoon, Kate and Hermione, along with the rest of the Gryffindors, made their way onto the grounds for their first flying lesson. It was a bright and sunny day with a small breeze that tugged at one's hair, slowly whipping it around as if it was too lazy to do anything more. They marched down the sloping lawns and toward the Forbidden Forest.

There, standing on a patch of flat grass, were the Slytherins. Lying on the ground in neat rows were several of the schools brooms. Kate had heard of theses. Fred and George had complained to her that the school brooms were far too old. Some would begin to vibrate if you went too high or always flew a little to the left, they had told her.

Their teacher arrived not long after the Gryffindors began to mull around. Madam Hooch had short, spiky gray hair and yellow eyes like a hawk.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

Kate glanced down at the broom she had stood next to. It looked very old and many of the twigs in the back were sticking up at odd angles. At least it wasn't warped like Hermione's was.

"Stick your right hand over your broom," Madam Hooch called, "and say 'Up!'"

"UP!" everyone cried.

Kate's broom jumped into her hand with satisfying force as soon as she uttered the word, but it was one of the few. Hermione's simply rolled over as the girl glared at her, giving her an I-told-you-so look. Neville's didn't move at all, but she thought that it was because of the quiver in his voice. He didn't sound like he wanted to leave the ground.

They were then shown the correct way to mount their brooms without falling off the end. Madam Hooch walked up and down the rows,

correcting grips here and there. Kate was delighted when Malfoy was told he'd been doing it wrong for years.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," Madam Hooch said. "Keep your broom steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle—three—two—"

Neville, nervous and jumpy and frightened of being left on the ground, pushed off hard before the whistle had touched Madam Hooch's lips.

"Come back, boy!" she shouted, but Neville didn't seem to be able to control his ascent. He rose up to twenty feet when he slipped sideways on his broom and began to hang upside down. Many of the girls screamed and Kate fumbled for her wand, desperate to help the poor boy. How, she didn't know, but she wanted to help. She was too late. Neville finally lost his grip and plummeted the twenty-five feet he had risen.

WHAM—Neville hit the ground with a dull thump and a nasty crack. He lay face down on the ground in a heap, whimpering with pain and holding his wrist against his chest. Kate dimly noted that his broom was still rising as it began to drift lazily over the forest and out of sight.

Meanwhile, Madam Hooch was bending over Neville, examining his wrist which he unwillingly let her handle.

"Broken wrist," she muttered. "Come on—it's all right, up you get." She turned to the rest of the class.

"None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, dear."

Neville hobbled off with Madam Hooch, his tear stained face contorted with pain as he clutched his wrist to his chest.

As soon as Madam Hooch was out of ear shot, Malfoy burst out laughing, followed soon by most of the Slytherins.

"Did you see his face!" he crowed to the rest of his house-mates.

“Shut up, Malfoy,” snapped Parvati.

“Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?” Pansy Parkinson asked in her high pitched nasal voice. “Never thought *you’d* like fat little cry-babies, Parvati.”

“Look!” Malfoy said, darting forward and snatching something off the ground. Kate took a step forward, her right hand itching to draw her wand. She recognized the Remembrall in his hand. “It’s that stupid thing Longbottom’s gran sent him.”

“Give that here, Malfoy,” Kate said quietly, effectively silencing everyone. They all seemed rather eager to see the famous Girl-Who-Lived in action.

“What, are you going to make me?” Malfoy asked disdainfully. “You’re about half my size!” This was true. Kate only reached up to Malfoy’s mid chest range. Unfortunately for Malfoy, big surprises usually came in little packages and he had effectively opened one.

Kate was extremely sensitive about her size as it reminded her of the abuse she received at the orphanage. “Pulsor!” she cried, whipping out her wand and sending a milky white Banishing Hex at Malfoy. The hex hit him full in the chest, sending him flying back several feet to land in the collective pile of brooms where most of the first years had deposited them.

Malfoy looked up at her fearfully and grabbed a broom, kicking off the ground to soar high into the air. Maybe he thought he was relatively safe from her up there as he began to taunt her. “Com and get it, Potter!”

With a low growl of anger, Kate shoved her wand back into her robes and picked up her broom.

“Kate, no! Madam Hooch told us to stay on the ground!” Hermione shouted, running up to restrain her friend.

“Hermione, this is something I have to do,” Kate said, before kicking off the ground herself.

“Fine! But don’t blame me if you’re expelled!” Hermione yelled after her.

She smiled almost blissfully. Being airborne was wonderful! The air rushed through her hair and whipped it around her face like a billowing black shadow. A rush of fierce joy ran through her as she rocketed up toward Malfoy. Several of the girls below were screaming and she heard one or more of the boys give a whoop of encouragement.

She drew level with Malfoy and turned to face him sharply. “Give it here,” she called out to him, “unless you want to experience the same fate as Neville.”

“Oh, yeah?” he said, trying to sneer but failing miserably at it. Kate didn’t give him any more warning. She leaned forward and the broom shot forward like a missile. Malfoy only just managed to get out of the way, his robes brushing her arm as she shot passed. She made a sharp turn, bringing her broom around to face Malfoy again, who looked decidedly green in the face. A number of people were applauding below.

Malfoy seemed to come to a decision just then as he threw the glass ball high into the air. “Catch it if you can!” he yelled as he streaked toward the relative safety of the ground.

Kate’s world seemed to slow down. She watched calmly as the ball rose up into the air and began to fall. She pressed herself flat on the broom and launched it into a steep dive. She was dimly aware of people’s screams as the wind howled in her ears. She stretched out her hand and snatched the ball out of the air scarcely a foot off the ground. Kate pulled back with all her strength on the handle, causing the broom to lose all its forward momentum and stand up on its tail, just brushing the grass. She landed with a light hop onto the grass.

“KATHERINE POTTER!”

Kate’s eyes snapped up and she groaned. Professor McGonagall was running toward them and she looked livid.

“*Never*—in all my time at Hogwarts—” She was almost speechless with shock and her glasses, which were slightly askew, flashed furiously, “—how *dare* you—might have broken your neck—”

“It wasn’t her fault, Professor—”

“Be quiet, Miss Patil—”

“But Malfoy—”

“That’s *enough*, Mr. Weasley. Potter, follow me.”

She glanced over her shoulder as she followed Professor McGonagall. Malfoy was smirking triumphantly with his goons. Kate sent him what could be constituted as a “death glare,” which promised much pain in the future. Malfoy visibly paled. She didn’t have any more time to contemplate Malfoy’s death as she had enough trouble keeping up with McGonagall.

Then it began to sink in, past the feelings of joy and freedom that she had when flying. She was going to be expelled. That’s what Madam Hooch had said.

“Professor, am I going to be expelled?” she asked in a small voice. McGonagall simply ignored and continued to sweep along, forcing her to jog to keep up. That worried her even more than if she had answered the question straight out.

Kate entertained the thought of staying at Hogwarts to help Hagrid. She envisioned herself lugging around his bag as he made his way about the grounds, taking care of his duties. Then she imagined some shadowy figure coming to snap her wand in half and fighting him off to become a fugitive. Neither option seemed very appealing.

Professor McGonagall stopped outside a classroom and opened the door. “Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a moment?”

Wood? Where had she heard that name before? Something Fred and George had mentioned...Quidditch?

Wood turned out to be a burly fifth-year boy who looked slightly confused to be summoned out of his Charms classroom by Professor McGonagall.

“Follow me, you two,” McGonagall said, and they marched up the corridor, all the while Wood was looking at Kate curiously. He didn’t seem to have recognized her yet.

“In here.”

Professor McGonagall pointed them into a classroom that was empty, save for Peeves, who was writing rude words on the blackboard. He turned at the commotion and was about to say something to McGonagall when he caught sight of Kate. He immediately threw down the chalk and swooped out of the room.

McGonagall and Wood each gave her a strange look. “That was interesting. I’ve only seen him act like that around the Bloody Baron,” McGonagall commented as she closed the door behind Peeves. She turned to face the two students, her strict demeanor back in place.

“Potter, this is Oliver Wood. Wood—I’ve found you a Seeker.”

Wood’s expression changed from confusion to shock to delight faster than she thought possible.

“Are you serious, Professor,” he asked, trying not to look too hopeful.

“Absolutely,” Professor McGonagall said crisply. “The girl’s a natural. I’ve never seen anything like it. Was that your first time on a broom, Potter?”

“Yeah...” she said, nodding. She remembered where she had heard Wood’s name before. Fred and George had told her stories about his...enthusiasm.

“She caught that thing in her hand after a fifty-foot dive. Didn’t even scratch herself and she managed to land on her feet. Charlie Weasley couldn’t have done it.”

“Ever seen a game of Quidditch, Potter?” Wood asked excitedly.

“Wood’s captain of the Gryffindor team,” McGonagall explained.

“I know, the Weasley twins told me,” Kate replied but was cut off by Wood.

“She’s just the build for a Seeker, too,” he said, now circling and staring at her as if she were a bit of meat he was appraising. “Light—speedy—small—we’ll have to get her a decent broom—a Nimbus Two Thousand or a Cleansweep Seven, I’d say.”

“I am still here you know, and I’d appreciate it if you stopped looking at me if I were a piece of meat at the grocers!” Kate seethed, her temper getting the best of her. “And don’t call me small!” She would have had better chances of attracting the attention of a brick wall.

“I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can’t bend the first-year rule. Heaven knows, we need a better team than last year. *Flattened* in that last match by Slytherin. I couldn’t look Severus in the face for weeks...”

Professor McGonagall finally seemed to acknowledge Kate’s presence in the room as she peered sternly at her over her glasses. “I want to hear you’re training hard, Potter, or I may change my mind about punishing you.”

Then she smiled. “Your father would have been proud,” she said. “He was an excellent Quidditch player himself.”

“You’re joking!”

Heads turned from all over the Great Hall at the outburst. Kate had been filling in Hermione, Fred, and George on what happened after she had left the grounds. Ron had been listening to the explanation and had made the outburst a few seconds ago.

“Keep it down,” Kate hissed at him, looking around at all the people staring at her. She glared at them, causing them to wisely turn away. Her display with Fred and George was still fresh in their minds.

“*Seeker?*” Ron whispered. “But first years *never*—you must be the youngest house player in about—”

“—a century,” Kate said impatiently as she stuck a spoon full of potatoes into her mouth.

Ron simply gaped at her. She didn’t know if this was from the little crush he had on her or amazement, but it was definitely something.

“Well, that would explain Wood’s actions earlier today then,” Fred said, putting a finger to his chin as he thought.

“Yeah, he was practically skipping down the corridors. You must be really good,” George replied before standing up along with George.

“We’ve got to go. Lee reckons he’s found a new secret passage out of the school.”

“Bet it’s that one behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy that we found in our first week. See you.”

The twins had only been gone for a few seconds when three people (Kate was being nice in using the term), that they would have rather not ruined their dinner, showed up. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were never a welcome sight.

“Having a last meal, Potter? When are you getting the train back to the Muggles?”

“Are you really that anxious to continue our little scuffle from earlier, Malfoy?” Kate asked, fingering her wand with a glint in her eyes. Malfoy looked a little frightened but he stood his ground as he didn’t think Kate would attack him in front of all the professors.

“I’d take you anytime, Potter,” Malfoy sneered, getting some of his usual poise back. “Tonight, if you want. Wizard’s duel. Wands only—no contact. What’s the matter? Never heard of a wizard’s duel before, I suppose?”

“No, I just think it’s a little sexist for it to be called a ‘Wizard’s duel’ as I’m obviously a witch,” Kate replied coolly at the same time Ron leapt to her defense.

“Of course she has. I’m her second, who’s yours?”

Malfoy looked between his goons. "Crabbe. Midnight all right? We'll meet you in the trophy room; that's always unlocked."

Malfoy left and Kate turned to face Ron, who was getting redder and redder under her scrutiny. "Do you really think one of us is going to die?" she asked, her voice laced with humor.

Ron shrugged while trying to control his blush. "I don't think you two will send more than sparks at each other. No one's going to get...hurt..." He trailed off at the look on Kate's face.

"I wouldn't be so sure. I'm itching to try some stuff on the git," Kate said, her eyes glittering again.

"Kate, you know you really shouldn't go..." Hermione started but stopped as Kate gave her a look.

"We've been over this far too many times, Hermione. I know what I'm doing and we won't get caught. Chances are he'll chicken out anyway." Hermione gave her a look that said this wasn't over but she let it be so they could all finish their dinners.

Kate sat in the common room with a silent Hermione, waiting for the room to empty so she could leave without getting into trouble. Hermione hadn't spoken to her since dinner, which made her a little nervous. Neither girl said anything, however, because they were both absorbed in their books to do anything else.

As eleven rolled by, Hermione set down her book and fixed Kate with a disapproving glare. Kate decided to ignore this as she continued to read up on the Silencing Charm.

Thirty minutes later, Ron came down the stairs from the boy's dormitory. Kate finally put her book down and stood up slowly. "I can't believe you're still going to do this, Kate." Hermione seemed ready to pick up her scolding from before at that moment and Kate was about to head her off when Ron did something stupid.

"*You!* Go back to bed!" Ron said furiously.

“I almost told your brother,” Hermione snapped, changing targets from her to Ron. “He would have put a stop to this, he’s a prefect.”

Kate struggled not to laugh at this and she would have given Hermione a grin if the girl hadn’t been so angry at her. “Come on,” Ron said, pushing open the portrait hole. Unfortunately, Hermione followed him through, hissing at him like an angry goose.

“Don’t you *care* about Gryffindor, do you *only* care about yourself, I don’t want Slytherin to win the house cup, and you’ll lose all the points I got from Professor McGonagall for knowing about Switching Spells.”

“Um—Hermione?” Kate said, a smile tugging at her lips.

“What?” she snapped.

“I have a feeling you’re going to find it very difficult to get back into the Common room.”

“And why is that?”

“Because the Fat Lady isn’t in her portrait at the moment,” Kate said, smiling slightly at the look of horror on her friends face.

“Now what am I going to do?” she asked shrilly before rounding on Ron. “This is all your fault!”

“That’s your problem,” Ron said, ignoring her outburst. “We’ve got to go, we’re going to be late.”

Hermione let out a breath and then turned to Kate. “I’m coming with you. It’ll be better than standing around and waiting for Filch to find me. And besides,” she whispered to Kate, “I want to see Malfoy cursed too.”

She giggled softly as they made their way down the corridor. “I’ve been a bad influence on you, Hermio—” Kate stopped speaking abruptly.

“What?—” Ron began before she shushed him.

"I heard something." Kate strained her ears and heard a quiet snuffling coming from down the corridor. Lying on the floor, curled up in a small ball, was Neville. He was fast asleep and the snuffling was his light snores. As soon as they got closer, he jerked awake, looking around frantically.

"Thank goodness you found me! I've been out here for hours, I couldn't remember the new password to get in to bed."

"Keep your voice down, Neville," Ron hissed at him. "The password's 'pig snout' but it won't help you now, the Fat Lady's gone off somewhere."

"How's your arm?" Kate asked, kneeling down beside him.

"It's fine. Madam Pomfrey mended it in about a minute."

"Good—well, look, Neville, we've got to be somewhere, we'll see you later—"

"Don't leave me!" Neville said frantically, scrambling to his feet. "The Bloody Baron's been past twice already." Ron glared at both Neville and Hermione before looking at his watch.

"Fine, but if either of you get us caught, I won't rest until I've learned that Curse of the Bogies Quirrell told us about, and used it on you."

Hermione opened her mouth and Kate knew she was about to tell him exactly how to perform the spell. "Not now, Hermione. You can tell him when we get back."

She gave her a sheepish look and followed her as she led them down the corridors. Being Fred and George's "apprentice" was very useful at times. Kate led them through secret passages to various floors, sufficiently confusing the group with her as she guided them to the seventh floor only to head down to the third.

"Where did you learn all this about the castle?" Ron whispered to her curiously.

“Trade secret. Can’t tell you.” She grinned at the look on Ron’s face as they came out of a tapestry right next to the Trophy Room. The four of them slunk into the room full of cups, shields, plates, and statues ranging from gold to bronze. Kate drew her wand calmly from her robes and waited at one end of the room with Ron behind her. Neville and Hermione stood off to the side in the shadows. The minutes crept by and soon it was fifteen minutes past midnight.

“He’s not coming, the bloody chicken,” Ron said, clenching his fist tightly.

“Shh...I hear something...” she whispered. Indeed, there was a noise coming from the next room. A voice was speaking.

“Sniff around, my sweet, they might be lurking in a corner.”

Kate rolled her eyes at Malfoy’s now obvious ploy. She gestured for them to follow her carefully out of the room and her robes had just whipped out of the door silently as Filch entered the room.

Neville seemed to be on the verge of panicking. His eyes were darting around swiftly and he was wringing his hands. “Neville, calm down,” Kate whispered to him, touching him lightly on the shoulder.

This turned out to be a very bad idea. Neville gave out a frightened squeak and broke into a run. He tripped, grabbed Ron around the waist and pulled them both crashing into a suit of armor. Kate winced at the cacophony of noise running through the air and quickly snatched Hermione’s hand and dashed past the boys. The two of them got up quickly and were soon right behind them.

She led them through a tapestry that took them very near their Charms class. “I’ll never figure out how you know all this,” Ron wheezed out, clutching his side.

“Come on, let’s just get back to the Tower. Just follow me,” Kate said as they caught their breath. She hadn’t taken more than a couple of steps, however, when Peeves shot out of a door in front of them. He gave a squeal of delight.

“Peeves...” Kate hissed, drawing his attention. Peeves backed away swiftly in the air a few feet and his voice took on the smarmy quality of when he spoke to the Bloody Baron.

“Ah, Miss Potter, I didn’t know it was you. I’m sorry, I’ll just be going my way...” Peeves said, his voice layered with sickly smarminess.

“Hold it right there, Peeves. I need you to do a favor for me.”

“Anything, anything you like, Miss Potter,” he said quickly, bobbing his head up and down.

“Go down there, and tell Filch in any manner that you choose, that we headed through *that* tapestry right there,” she said, pointing at a threading of several monks sitting around a table. “Yell to get his attention if you have to. Just wait until we’re a little ways down the corridor.”

Peeves nodded his head again, his maniacal grin forming on his face at the prospect of nettling Filch.

“Come on, let’s go,” Kate said to her wide eyed group. She led them down the corridor to a locked door at the end. “Okay, when I open this door, don’t scream. It needs to hear me,” she said seriously, looking at each of them before she tapped the lock and swung the door open.

Inside, filling up most of the room in the forbidden corridor on the third floor, was a three headed dog of massive proportions. Her friends went white in the face and tried to back out of the room but Kate closed the door behind them. The dog growled at their entrance and was about to launch itself at them when Kate began to sing.

She wasn’t doing much more than stringing notes together loudly instead of her humming. The dog’s eyes drooped and soon, it lay down on the ground, resting its heads on its massive front paws. Still singing, Kate walked forward and scratched the nearest head firmly behind the ear. The three headed dog snored loudly and after a minute or so, Kate walked back to the door and opened it, still singing to the dog as her friends exited as white faced as they went in.

When the door clicked shut and the lock was back in place, everyone turned to her but she intercepted all their questions before they could ask. "Wait until we're in the common room."

She led them back to Gryffindor Tower a completely different way than she had led them down and when they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, they were grateful to see her in her frame.

"Where on Earth have you all been?" she asked, looking at them suspiciously.

"Pig snout," Kate said calmly and the portrait swung open. She scrambled through the portrait hole and into the common room, taking a seat next to the fire. The other three arranged themselves around her and pinned her with accusing gazes.

"Explain—Everything—Now—" Hermione said, clearly not yet able to string a sentence together after her experience.

Kate gave an exaggerated sigh and began her story. "It all starts and ends with Fred and George. You see, after my initiation prank on the Slytherins—"

"That was you!"

"Yes," she said, ignoring Ron's interruption, "anyway, after that, the twins began to show me the ropes on how to get around the castle. They showed me secret passages all over the place to get to just about anywhere I wanted. Thus, the "pranking spree," their words, began."

"I was being used as a sort of back up agent in their agendas into the night. Hermione, I think you've noticed that sometimes I don't come up from the common room until very late." Hermione nodded. "Eventually, they began to show me the inner workings of their pranking art. They also told me to keep an eye and ear out for anything in that third floor corridor."

"Last weekend, I was walking by the door to that monster's room humming loudly and walking much slower than usual. I felt this huge *thud* through my shoes and then some loud snores. Curiosity got the

better of me so I opened the door to check it out. To say the least, I was scared out of my wits to see such a huge...thing lying on the ground. I stopped humming and it began to wake up. One mad dash later, I was outside the corridor and locking the door.”

“I went to Fred and George at once, telling them what I had seen and before I was done explaining, they had planned a late night excursion to see it for themselves. That’s when we learned how to put it to sleep. Music. To make a long story short, we pet the thing, admired it for a while, and then left. Not much happened really.”

“Not much happened! You could have been killed!” Hermione screeched, having regained control of her voice.

“I know,” Kate said calmly. A little too calmly for Hermione’s sake as she looked just about ready to start pulling out her hair.

“But...why is it here? What reason do they have to keep that locked up in a school like that?” Ron demanded.

“Because it’s guarding something.” Neville and Ron looked at her like she was crazy.

“She’s right, you know,” Hermione piped up.

“How do you know?”

“Do you use your eyes at all, Ron?”

“Of course I do!”

“Well, then did you see what it was standing on?”

“The floor?”

“Ron, that’s stupid! Why would we ask you what it was standing on if it was just the floor?” Kate asked, her temper rising at the general stupidity of the male race.

“It was standing on a trap door, thus guarding something. Right, Kate?”

“Yep. Now all we need to do is find out what.”

“Oh no! We’re going to leave this alone! It’s obviously there to *keep* people from figuring things out!” Hermione said, clearly unwilling to have anything more to do with the dog.

“Come on, Hermione. It would be a challenge. We won’t tell anyone.”

“Well...maybe. Right now I just want to go to bed.”

“I guess you’re right. ‘Night boys,” Kate called to Neville and Ron, giving them a backwards wave as she walked up the girl’s staircase. One thought reverberated through her head, however. She knew where Hagrid had taken the grubby little package from Gringotts.

Chapter Seven: Halloween

Kate grinned at Malfoy the next morning when she walked into the Great Hall. He seemed like he was having trouble swallowing the fact that she was still present in the castle let alone walking into the room for breakfast. Hermione was still a little miffed about their late night excursion but she seemed to be getting over it. Ron on the other hand, had turned back into the blushing, speechless boy overnight. He did seem a bit more comfortable around her and he could actually put a sentence together in her presence but he still had trouble controlling his blushes.

Meanwhile, Kate and Hermione were discussing what the thing the three-headed dog was guarding. "It's small...and very valuable or it wouldn't have been in that high-security vault," Kate said, tapping her fork against her chin thoughtfully.

"It may be dangerous," Hermione supplied. "We just don't know enough about it. You said it was about as big as your palm. That's not very big Kate and that leaves a lot of options."

"I know, I know...I just wish we had some more clues and then we would know where to start looking."

"So...how do you think I should get Malfoy back? I still owe him a few curses," Kate said after downing some pumpkin juice.

"Oh no you don't! I'm not letting you drag me into this whole pranking business. Take it up with Fred and George if you need ideas."

"Fine..."

It turned out, however, that Kate had no need to ask Fred and George for some pay back material. The perfect solution came in the mail about a week later.

Owls flooded into the Great Hall as the usually did in the mornings. But, something had gathered everyone's attention on this particular morning. This something just happened to be a rather long parcel being carried by six large screech owls. Kate was just as interested as everyone else to see where the package would land and was

shocked when the owls dropped it on hers, Hermione's, and Parvati's breakfast. Another owl swooped down moments later and dropped a letter on top of the parcel.

Kate wisely opened the letter first and skimmed through it before a huge grin slid across her face. She handed Hermione the note that read:

DO NOT OPEN THE PARCEL AT THE TABLE. It contains your new Nimbus Two Thousand, but I don't want everybody knowing you've got a broomstick or they'll all want one. Oliver Wood will meet you tonight on the Quidditch field at seven 'o clock for your first training session.

Professor M. McGonagall

"Is that good?" Hermione asked as she finished reading the note.

Kate groaned. "Hermione, you may be the brightest witch in the castle but you know next to nothing about quidditch," Kate said but continued as she saw the questioning look still on her friend's face. "Yes, Hermione, it's good. The best there is right now."

"Oh..."

"Is that it? 'Oh?'" she asked incredulously.

Hermione giggled. "No, it's just the letter said that this was a secret right?" Kate nodded. "Well then, we can't go jumping around for joy while screaming with happiness now can we?" Kate shook her head and then a grin split her face again.

"But we can do that in the dorms!" Hermione smiled and stood up as Kate picked up her new broomstick. They were almost out of the Great Hall when Malfoy intercepted them with his ever faithful goons.

"You really must have a death wish, Malfoy," Kate growled when he stepped into their path. He tried to snatch the parcel out of her hands but she stepped back before he could reach her.

"That's a broomstick," he said, throwing her an envious look along with a look that said he was going to rat her out as soon as he could. "You'll be in for it this time, Potter, First years aren't allowed them."

"I know that, Malfoy," Kate replied but didn't elaborate.

"Would you please move? We need to get up these stairs," Hermione asked in a polite voice that never really reached her eyes. Kate could see her hand in her pocket clench her wand tightly.

"No one was talking to you, Muggle," Malfoy snapped. In an instant, both Hermione's and Kate's wands were pointed directly at Malfoy's face.

"What was that, Malfoy?" Kate asked sweetly. Without warning, however, Professor Flitwick appeared on the scene.

"Not arguing, I hope," he squeaked.

"Potter's been sent a broomstick, Professor," Malfoy said quickly.

"Yes, yes, that's right," the tiny professor said, beaming at Kate. "Professor McGonagall has told me all about the special circumstances, Miss Potter. And what model is it?"

"A Nimbus Two Thousand, sir," Kate said with a grin at Malfoy over the Professor's head. She and Hermione walked past the three Slytherins, laughing madly at their shocked faces.

"That...was priceless..." Kate gasped out as they walked through the portrait hole some minutes later.

"I know! What I would have given to have a camera," Hermione said with a giggle as she stepped into the common room. Then she turned serious. "You're going to have to concentrate even more on your school work with Quidditch practice now."

Kate laughed again at her friend's antics. "Don't worry, Hermione. I won't fall behind. I promise to give you a healthy run for the top of the class slot." Hermione grinned as they hiked up the stairs to put away the still wrapped broomstick and collect their bags.

The lessons that day seemed to go by at a crawling pace. It seemed to take ages for them to get to lunch and then longer yet for dinner to arrive. When it did, Kate made the most of it and bolted down her usual amount of food while Hermione shook her head in wonder at the small girl's appetite.

Soon thereafter, Kate bounced out of her chair, dragging Hermione along with her. "You have to help me open it!" she cried once they were in the corridors on their way up to the tower.

Hermione laughed. She rarely ever got to see Kate as the little eleven year old she was. With her missing her childhood, the famous girl was very mature for her age. "Somehow, I don't think you'd need my help in unwrapping it."

"Awww...you're no fun, Hermione!" Hermione dimly wondered if this would be how she was like around Christmas. The two girls hurried into the common room and Kate bounced up the stairs and flung open the door to their room.

"Hurry up, Hermione!" she called, having already taken up a perch on her bed and picked up the broom but had waited to unwrap it for her friend to reach the room. Her shouts and loud bouncing woke Hazel up from her little nap. The kitten mewled pitifully at her and settled itself on top of the broomstick.

Hermione walked into the room and sat down next to Kate. "You take that end," Kate said excitedly. Together, the girls made short work of the wrapping, throwing it haphazardly all over the place. Hazel seemed to enjoy this very much as she chased random bits of paper everywhere.

The two girls pulled the broom from its last vestiges of wrapping and held it up to the light to examine. It had a sleek and shiny mahogany handle, a tail of straight twigs, and Nimbus Two Thousand written in gold near the top.

"I never thought I'd see you excited about a broomstick, Hermione. You seemed a bit...anti-flying."

Hermione grinned. "Oh, I may not like flying, but I know *you* love flying so I'm going to be supportive and happy and all that. Besides, I liked watching you be happy. I hadn't seen you smile like that ever."

Kate grinned at her friend. "Thanks, Hermione," she said, capturing her in a hug. "You're the best friend I could have."

"You better believe it. Now, let's get some homework done before you have to leave for your practice."

At seven 'o clock, Kate left the dorm and headed out to the grounds. She and Hermione had plowed through all of their homework quickly and had been working on various charms and hexes when Hermione noticed what time it was. Kate had rushed up to her room, retrieved her broom and left promptly, calling to Hermione to save her spot in the book.

Once on the Quidditch pitch, she simply couldn't wait to try out her new broom and kicked off the ground. A smile formed on her lips once again as she swooped through the air and weaved in and out of the goal hoops. With annoyance, she noticed that her hair would whip into her face on sharp turns. With a thought, it shortened considerably and turned very spiky and messy.

She glanced below her and saw Wood walking out of Madam Hooch's store room carrying a large box under his arm. With a grin, she pelted skyward and then stopped her ascent, flipped over and dove straight down to a spot directly in his path. He stopped to watch, his hand shielding his eyes. With a laugh and only a few feet to go before she made herself a human pancake, Kate pulled back on her Nimbus' handle, causing it to level itself and then point upward, opposite the direction it came.

With all her forward momentum stopped, Kate hopped lightly to the ground off her vertical broomstick. She smiled happily at Wood's flabbergasted expression. "How—Merlin...McGonagall wasn't lying..." he muttered before he collected himself to stare at her. He was about to begin when his eyes traveled up to her hair. "What happened to your hair?" he asked, pointing blatantly at her head.

“Huh? Oh!” Kate exclaimed and gave him a sheepish smile. “Just wanted to keep it out of my face.” With a thought, her hair lengthened down her back again. Wood stared at her once again.

“You’re full of surprises,” he said, shaking his head. “I knew a girl that could do stuff like that too. Graduated last year. Never had the same color hair or eyes from day to day. Kept changing them so no one really knows what she looked like.” He shook his head again. “Anyway, let’s begin, shall we?”

“Now I’m just going to be teaching you the rules and such today and then you’ll join regular practices every three weeks,” he said quickly while opening the crate. He pulled out a red Quaffle and before she could interrupt him to make it plain that she knew the rules already, he went on.

“Now, Quidditch is easy enough to understand, even if it’s not that easy to play. Each team has seven players. Three are called Chasers.”

“Wood...”

“This ball’s called the Quaffle. The Chasers throw the Quaffle to each other and try to get it through one of the hoops to score a goal. Ten points every time the Quaffle goes through one of the hoops. Follow me?”

“Wood...!”

But he continued on, ignoring his own question and her outburst. “There’s another player on each side who’s called the Keeper—I’m Keeper for Gryffindor. I have to fly around our hoops and stop the other team from scoring.”

“Wood!”

And on he plowed while handing her a bat. Kate knew exactly what this was for and she wasn’t eager to go up against a Bludger. “I’m going to show you what the Bludgers do. These two are Bludgers,” he said, indicating the jet black balls struggling on their restraints. He

was about to unclip one of the Bludgers when she hit him in the back with the bat.

“WOOD!”

“Huh? What is it?”

“I know all this already.”

“Really? Why didn’t you say so?” he asked, looking down at her with a disapproving glare.

“It’s really hard to interrupt your ranting. I said so three times before now, you know.”

“Oh...so you know the rules?”

“Yep.”

“Well, that gets that out of the way,” he said, taking the bat from her and replacing it in the crate. He then pulled out a bag from his pocket. “Since we can’t practice with the Snitch right now, I think these will do nicely,” he said, showing her the bag full of small white balls.

The two jumped onto their brooms and flew to the middle of the pitch where Wood threw the tiny balls in every direction and as hard as he could. By the time they were done, Kate hadn’t missed a single one and Wood looked like he was floating on a cloud. “The Cup’ll have our name on it this year,” he said happily as they walked up to the castle a half hour later. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you turn out better than Charlie Weasley, and he could have played for England if he hadn’t gone off chasing dragons.”

Maybe it was because she was so busy now, with Quidditch three evenings a week, homework (which really wasn’t that bad), and excursions into the castle for pranking during the evenings, but Kate could scarcely believe that she’d already been at Hogwarts for two months. It felt more like a home than the orphanage had but it was distinctly lacking in the area of the feeling you got when you could parallel with the people you lived with. Sure, Hermione and the girls could imagine what it was like to go hungry for a week, scrub the

floors all day, sew until their feet were going to fall off, or any number of things that she had to do at the orphanage, but they could never really get the feeling right. The feeling of downright helplessness in one's situation. It wasn't until she had run away that she had felt properly good in her life.

But she decided not to dwell on the past and instead focus on the present and her classes. She and Hermione were most pleased when their classmates finally learned the basics and they could move onto the harder things that the two were having trouble mastering on their own. A perfect of example showing how far the two were ahead of their year was given on Halloween, a holiday Kate just recently learned about thanks to Hermione.

That morning, she woke up to the delicious smell of baking...something. She couldn't really identify the smell. She'd ask Hermione when she had the time. Kate moved Hazel from her usual perch in the crook of her neck, much to the protests of the sleeping kitten, and set her down on the warm indent her curled up form had made in the mattress.

Their first class for the day was Charms. They were all looking forward to this class as Professor Flitwick had told them that he thought them ready to begin to make objects fly, something they had been dying to try ever since they'd seen him make Neville's toad Trevor zip around the room. Of course Hermione and herself had already mastered the charm. It had been quite easy. All one had to do was watch out for the pronunciation and articulation of the incantation. Latin was a very simple language and most of the spells had their roots there.

Professor Flitwick had decided to lose his common sense that day and paired them up himself instead of letting them choose their partners. Kate was paired up with Seamus. She didn't really mind but she would have liked to be partnered with Hermione. They got more work done together than alone. That, and Hermione never set anything on fire before.

Seamus had been getting frustrated with his lack of success so he prodded their feather with his wand. It surprised them both when it

burst into flames, calling for Kate to smother it with her hat. Yet, even with her less-than-satisfactory partner, it was nothing to how frustrated Hermione must have been feeling.

True, Kate went out of her way to give people a chance to befriend her and she had gone doubly out of her way for Ron Weasley. She didn't like the idea of someone in her own house unable to talk to her because of some stupid hero worshiping crush. But, she had to admit, Ron could be very, very frustrating as he so kindly demonstrated for her bushy-haired friend.

Kate watched with growing fear as Ron swung his arms around uselessly while yelling, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" She knew what was coming next. The look on Hermione's face was unmistakable.

"You're saying it wrong," she snapped, his incorrect, yet comic, use of the Latin language finally getting to her. "It's Wing-gar-dium Levi-o-sa, make the 'gar' nice and long."

"You do it, then, if you're so clever," Ron snarled back.

Hermione rolled her eyes and picked up her wand from the table, flicked it, and said, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" The feather rose dutifully into the air and hovered above their heads.

"Well done!" Flitwick cried, clapping loudly, "Everyone see here, Miss Granger's done it!"

With a grin, Kate aimed her wand and muttered the incantation towards Neville's feather. It rose off the table and flew straight at Hermione's like a dart. Kate then directed it with her wand and used the feather to gently tickle the end of Ron's nose.

"And you too, Miss Potter!" the diminutive professor cried, absolutely ecstatic to see two of his students master the spell so quickly. Ron sent her and Hermione separate glares and folded his arms sourly. To state things lightly, Ron was in a bad mood by the end of class.

"It's no wonder why the two of them are friends," Kate heard Ron telling Dean as they walked to their next class, "they're a nightmare,

honestly. Always showing off that they're so much smarter than we are. Insufferable-know-it-alls!"

Kate was surprised by his turn from hero-worshiping. Although this didn't make such a good compromise. She looked over at Hermione, getting ready to tell her friend to ignore it when she bolted down the corridor, brushing past Ron as she went. Before she had left, however, Kate had seen the wet streaks on her face.

"Good one, Ron," she snapped angrily at him as she rushed past in pursuit of her friend. At least he had the proper shame to be guilty, she thought as she followed the bouncing head of bushy hair. She watched as Hermione ducked into the girl's bathroom on the second floor.

Kate slowed down her pace and began to walk leisurely down the corridor. The halls around her emptied as everyone ducked into classroom at the last minute. Kate reached the bathroom door as the booming bell signaled the beginning of classes. Tentatively, she opened the door and stepped inside.

"Hermione?" she asked softly.

"Go 'way," came the reply from the stall at the end.

"Come on, Hermione. Why won't you talk to me?" Kate responded, walking toward the last stall and standing patiently on the other side.

"You're late for class," Hermione replied with a stuffy voice. A sob echoed through the room and Kate vowed she'd make Ronald Weasley regret this. She opened the door slowly and stepped inside.

Hermione was sitting on the toilet seat, her head buried in her hands and her bag thrown haphazardly on the floor. Kate knelt down next to her and slowly, gently pulled her hands away from her face. Hermione's chocolate colored eyes were slightly blood shot and puffy and there were tear stains running down her cheeks. Kate pulled her friend into a hug which only caused her to begin to cry again but in more of a I've-had-pent-up-tears-for-a-while-now-and-I-need-to-let-them-out. She let her cry for some time, simply letting the tears soak into her robes.

The class bell rang again, signaling lunch break but Hermione made no show of getting up so Kate stayed. Parvati came in sometime after that, asking about the two of them. Kate told her they were fine and she was just helping her friend. Before Parvati could leave, however, she told her, "Make sure Ron knows where we are and make sure he feels guilty for it." Parvati nodded and left.

"You're not going to take what that git said to heart, are you?" she asked finally, slowly rubbing her friend's back with little circles as she cried on her shoulder. It was the first time she had spoken to Hermione since she had entered the bathroom. Hermione sniffed loudly. "Ron's just being jealous of you. I mean, face it Hermione, how many Muggle-born witches could do the things you can. He's from a family of all magic and you're out doing him in everything."

Hermione made another sniff but her sobs had lessened. "You'll be fine. Just ignore him; he doesn't deserve your attention anyway. Not if he can't accept you for you."

The two sat together quietly for who knew how long. "The feast must be starting soon, feeling up to it?" Kate asked after a while.

Hermione shook her head silently. It had been some time since she had stopped crying but she still hadn't spoken. The faint roar of hundreds of feet reached their ears through the bathroom door. Someone had left it open during the course of the day but neither of them minded.

Kate began to hum softly, more to pass the time than to entertain but Hermione seemed to find it soothing and was soon smiling as she listened. "Come on, let's go back to the common room. We can ask Fred and George to nick us some food."

"Yeah, okay," Hermione replied, her voice a little scratchy and slightly higher than normal. "Thanks, Kate," she added, engulfing her in a hug. Kate pushed open the stall door and stepped out, picking up her bag. She stopped suddenly as the most horrible smell assaulted her nose. She looked toward the door and saw, to her horror, a twelve foot tall, dull gray skinned, lumpy bodied, bald headed troll step into the bathroom.

The door locked behind it.

“You have got to be kidding me...” Kate muttered to herself as she stared with a sort of transfixed horror as the troll looked around with its beady eyes.

Hermione stepped out of the stall, took one look and let out a clipped scream that echoed through the room. She fell over and scooted as far away from the monster as she could. Unfortunately, Hermione’s scream seemed to have drawn its attention toward them as it turned and began to lumber in their direction.

Kate whipped out her wand, thinking desperately of any spell that might help. “Conglacio!” she cried, sending a stream of icy air and water at the troll’s face. It staggered for a moment, trying to blink open its eyes before using one of its long arms to brush away the ice.

“Hermione, run! Come on, get up!” Kate shouted to the brown haired girl but she seemed to be in shock from one too many emotional traumas in one day. As the troll advanced slowly, its swinging arms and club carelessly knocked sinks off the walls and stalls into splinters.

She waved her wand and muttered, “Wingardium Leviosa,” while pointing at some of the rubble across the room. It jumped into the air and Kate threw it against the wall with a flick of her wand, causing the troll to make a lumbering turn to see what had made the noise.

Just as the troll finished its turn, the bathroom door burst open, dumping in a panting Ron. The troll spotted him at once and swung its club down at him with frightening accuracy. Ron stood frozen with shock and she knew that he wouldn’t be able to get out of the way in time. The club was five feet above him...four feet...three feet...there was no stopping it now...

“PULSOR!” echoed through the room as a milky white beam of light shot over her shoulder and hit the club’s side, pushing it off course to miss Ron by a scant foot. His legs seeming to regain their feeling, Ron dashed away from the troll but found himself pressed against a wall. There was no doubt that the troll wouldn’t miss this time.

When the troll began to lift its club again was when Kate did something completely and utterly stupid. She took a running start and jumped full onto the creature's back, hooking her arms around its neck. Now, it didn't notice her hanging up there but it did notice the small piece of wood ignite with a blinding flare of light right in front of its eyes as Kate whispered, "Lumos!"

The troll roared in pain and fury and flailed around. Its club hit the ceiling, causing several stones to fall loose. Ron, performing a stroke of brilliance that Kate hadn't thought possible for him, raised his wand and cried, "Wingardium Leviosa!" The troll's club, which had been inches from smashing her on its back, flew into the air and rose high above its owner's head. It rolled over slowly in the air and finally fell with a sickening crunch onto the troll's small head.

The troll went cross-eyed and began to sway. Kate hopped off and was just standing up when it fell over and landed face first on the ground with a huge crash. Ron, his wand still raised, was standing just in front of its head. Hermione was just standing up from her position on the wall and Kate was putting her wand back into her pocket when several people came rushing into the room, wands raised.

Professor's Quirrell, Snape, and McGonagall came into the room looking ready to do some serious bodily harm. Well, except Quirrell, for he sat down on the nearest toilet seat when he caught sight of the unconscious troll.

Snape bent to examine the troll while McGonagall pinned Kate and Ron with furious glares. Her lips were set in a firm white line and she looked like she was about to explode.

"What on earth were you thinking?" she said, her fury evident in every tone of her voice. Kate glanced at Ron and almost smiled at the sight of his wand still held in the air in front of him. "You're lucky you weren't killed. Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

Snape threw Kate a sharp, piercing look. She matched it until he looked away and back toward the troll. It looked as if McGonagall was getting ready to begin a tongue lashing that might even rival the one she gave Fred and George when Hermione finally spoke up.

“Please, Professor McGonagall—they were looking for me.”

“Miss Granger!”

“I went looking for the troll,” Kate nearly snapped her neck as she spun around to look at her friend, “because I—I thought I could deal with it on my own—you know, because I’ve read all about them.”

Ron dropped his wand. Apparently, witnessing Hermione Granger tell a downright lie to a teacher was a bit too much for him to believe.

“If they hadn’t found me, I’d be dead now. Kate blinded it and Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn’t have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they arrived.”

Ron gave Kate a significant look and was opening his mouth to say something when she shook her head slightly. His mouth closed and he returned his attention to Hermione.

“Well—in that case...” McGonagall said, staring at the three of them, “Miss Granger, you foolish girl, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?” Hermione hung her head. Kate could hardly believe it. All it took was saving her from a troll to get her to break a rule. *Now how come I didn’t think of that?* she wondered sarcastically.

“Miss Granger, five points will be taken from Gryffindor for this. I’m very disappointed in you. If you’re not hurt at all, you’d better get off to Gryffindor tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses.”

Hermione picked up her bag and left. McGonagall rounded on Kate and Ron.

“Well, I still say you were lucky, but not many first years could have taken on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win Gryffindor five points. Professor Dumbledore will be informed of this. You may go.”

They hurried out of the bathroom but Kate looked over her shoulder as they left. Snape was limping around the troll now, examining it from all angles. Wait—limping! She tucked the information away for future evaluation as they walked through the corridors.

"We should have gotten more than ten points," Ron grumbled eventually.

Kate sighed. "You mean five? She still has to take of Hermione's."

"Good of her to get us out of trouble like that," Ron said. "Mind you, we *did* save her."

"Well, she wouldn't have needed saving if you hadn't called us *insufferable*-know-it-alls, now would she?" Ron looked uncomfortable but he didn't get a chance to say anything as they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Pig snout," Kate said and stepped in front of Ron and climbed inside.

The common room was packed and noisy. She'd never seen it so busy as people pushed past each other to get to the food. Hermione was standing off to the side, waiting for them to come in. "Thanks," she said to Ron, causing an awkward, embarrassed silence. Then they all moved at once to get their plates.

From that moment on; Kate, Hermione, and Ron were an inseparable trio. There were just some things you can't share together without becoming friends, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll just happened to be one of them.

Chapter Eight: Quidditch

November heralded the beginning of the winter season at Hogwarts. The mountains around the school turned an icy gray and the lake shone like chilled steel. Every morning, the ground was covered with frost and they could see Hagrid defrosting broomsticks out on the Quidditch pitch in his long moleskin overcoat, rabbit fur gloves, and enormous beaverskin boots.

The Quidditch season was just about to come into full swing, with Kate's first match on the upcoming Saturday. She'd been training with the Gryffindor team for quite some time now and if they won the match against Slytherin, Gryffindor house would move up to first place in the house championship.

Almost no one had seen her play yet as Wood thought that if Kate was going to be his secret weapon, it would be a good idea to keep her just that. Secret. Somehow, the news of her playing Seeker for the team leaked out and now she was being accosted worse than ever. Indeed, several people were wishing her luck and thought she must be really good to be on the team in her first year. Yet others, mainly Slytherins, would make taunting remarks toward her and thought the Gryffindor team had to be desperate to put such a "little shrimp," Malfoy's words, on their team.

Unfortunately, Malfoy had a terrible accident that week. Something that went along the lines of falling down several flights of stairs and onto a Full-Body Bind jinx. No one knew exactly how this had happened, but several had an inkling. All were too afraid, however, to rat Kate out of fear of similar treatment.

Wood didn't really help ease her apprehension at all about playing in the upcoming match. He had scheduled so many extra practices that she was having trouble keeping up with her homework. Lucky for her, Hermione was her best friend and was more than delighted to help. She even lent her *Quidditch Through the Ages* which spelled out all the rules for Quidditch and some helpful tips for each position.

What surprised her greatly was Hermione's new, relaxed view on the school rules. Apparently, having been saved from a mountain troll does that to a person as if Ron hadn't disobeyed the rules, the two of

them might have died. For example, the day before Kate's game the three of them were standing in the freezing courtyard during break when Hermione performed a Bluebell Fire charm. The small, warm little blue fire could be carried around in a jam jar. They each had their backs to it and it was warming them nicely when they saw Snape crossing the courtyard.

The three of them quickly closed around the small fire, shielding it from view as they knew it wouldn't be allowed. Seeing Ron and Hermione's guilty faces and Kate's far too innocent face was cause enough for Snape to limp his way over to them.

"What's that you have there, Miss Potter?" he asked, his voice not dripping with the venom it usually did when addressing Gryffindors but still sounding stern none the less.

Kate showed him *Quidditch Through the Ages*.

"Library books are not to be taken outside the school," Snape said. "Give it to me. You can pick it up later this evening."

Then he was gone, limping away with the only thing that had been keeping her mind together. "I wonder what's wrong with his leg," Hermione asked, worry evident in her voice.

"Who cares, I just hope it's really hurting him," Ron said bitterly.

The Gryffindor common room was very noisy that evening. Kate was lying down on a window sill, looking over the grounds. Ron and Hermione were nearby. Hermione was helping Ron with his homework but all he wanted to do was simply "check his answers against hers." So, he learned another useful trick. He'd ask Hermione to read through his homework so he got the right answers anyway.

However, this left Kate with little to do but twirl her wand around in her fingers and cycle her hair from color to color. She had finished her homework some time ago, which was the reason she was currently on the window sill. Her changing hair did not go unnoticed by Hermione though.

"Kate, if you're so nervous, why don't you read a book?" she asked irritably.

"I guess you're right...maybe it's time I go get that book back from Professor Snape."

"Better you than me!" Ron and Hermione chorused.

Kate shook her head and sighed before standing up and leaving the common room. It was very dark in the corridors and going from the seventh floor down to the first was a very long way to go indeed. She was so bored by the walk that she stopped by the three headed dog's door and listened to it growling into the night.

Finally, she saw the staff room door down the corridor. With a relieved sigh she walked up to it and knocked softly. Nothing. She knocked again, this time with a little more force. Still nothing.

Maybe Snape had left the book in there. She opened the door slowly and noiselessly stepped into the room. The sight that greeted her was not one she had been expecting. Snape and Filch were sitting at the long table, Snape with the hem of his robes drawn up, revealing a bloody and mangled leg. Filch was handing Snape bandages.

"Blasted thing," Snape said. "How are you supposed to keep your eyes on all three heads at once?"

Kate stood stock still, willing them not to notice her. The door was propped open slightly and if she could get to it, she could knock properly on the outside. Fate was not with her that evening as Filch looked up moments later and caught sight of her.

"POTTER!"

Filch looked like he was ready to pounce and Snape had dropped his robes back to the floor. Snape looked a bit shocked at the development but hadn't said anything. Instead, he reached onto the table and flung a book at her. She caught it, quickly scanned the title and left, muttering a quick, "Thank you, sir."

Kate rushed back to Gryffindor tower, not quite sure what to make of the scene she had walked in on. Snape had been bitten by the dog...and that's all she knew. Maybe he took a wrong turn one night. She shook her head and decided she'd run it past Ron and Hermione.

Which is what she did when she entered the common room.

Kate set the book on the table and gestured for Hermione and Ron to come closer so they could hear as she filled them in on what she had just seen.

"Do you know what this means? He tried to get past that three headed dog on Halloween! That's where he was going right before I found you two with the troll. I bet *he* let the troll in as a diversion!" Ron exclaimed, clearly proud of himself for putting so much together.

"Why didn't you report that you had seen Snape going toward the third floor earlier?" Kate asked with exasperation.

"Dunno. Didn't think it was that important at the time," Ron shrugged.

"But...he wouldn't," Hermione said. "I know he's not very nice," Kate gave her a look. "Well, not nice to everyone else, but he wouldn't try to steal something Dumbledore was keeping safe."

"Honestly, Hermione, you think all teachers are saints or something," Ron snapped.

"Ron," Kate said with exasperation, "Snape is about as likely to steal something as...as Quirrell is."

And with that, they went up to bed. Kate slipped behind her hangings and sat up late into the night. She had been giving it some serious thought. Someone had let that troll in on Halloween but who? She honestly didn't think it was Snape, even though he could get mean sometimes. In fact, it was more likely to be Quirrell. He was the one who saw the troll first and then conveniently "passed out" only to come in with the rescue crew. He hadn't seemed that out of it to her.

She shook her head and lay down, letting the warmth and comfort of her bed encompass her. The last thoughts in her mind had strayed

from the topic of the three headed dog and to Quidditch. Now that was something to be really worried about.

Kate woke up the next morning very early. She felt awful. It might have been nerves or hunger or sleepiness or an evil combination of all three. It didn't really matter though because she still felt awful. When Hermione woke up, she took pity on her friend and led her down to breakfast.

Kate sat down and simply looked at her empty plate. Hermione couldn't stand the look of patheticness that was her friend so she served her some bacon, sausage, and toast. Nothing seemed that appealing to her and she still hadn't eaten anything by the time Ron came downstairs an hour later.

"Ron, help me convince her to eat something," Hermione said, throwing Kate a look of exasperation.

"Kate, you've got to eat some breakfast."

"Wow, Ron, just woo me with your tactful negotiation skills," Kate said dryly.

"Kate, you need your strength," Seamus piped up. "Seekers are always the ones that get clobbered by the other team."

"You know," Kate asked, turning toward Seamus and Ron, "You two should get together sometime. Make a therapy group to help raise people's nerves."

By the time the rest of the team came down, Kate still hadn't eaten anything. She was set upon by the three Chaser girls at once. Unfortunately, they didn't have much patience for Kate's nervousness and Angelina Johnson simply gave her the "chew or choke" policy. The dark skinned girl had shoved a slice of toast forcefully down her throat, which ended up being the only thing Kate ate for breakfast.

At eleven 'o clock, the team and the rest of the school made their way out to the Quidditch pitch. Many of the students were carrying binoculars. Even though the seats were raised quite a bit, you still couldn't see what was going on properly without them.

While everyone was heading up into the stands, Kate and the rest of the team was in the locker room. They changed into their scarlet Quidditch robes and sat down on the benches around Wood. He cleared his throat for silence before plunging on into his speech.

“Okay, men,” he said.

“And women,” Angelina added.

“And women,” Wood agreed. “This is it.”

“The big one,” Fred interrupted.

“The one we’ve all been waiting for,” continued George.

“The one that will make us or break us,” piped up Kate. Wood faced her with a shocked expression. “They’ve told me all about it, Oliver.”

He simply glared at the Weasley twins. “This is the best team Gryffindor’s had in years. We’re going to win. I know it.” His glare clearly added on the silent words, “Or else” to the end of that statement.

“Right. It’s time. Good luck, all of you.”

Kate followed the three Chasers out of the locker room and walked out onto the field. Seeing that many people around, however, made her want to do nothing more than turn right around and hide in the locker room. Unfortunately, this was not an option for two reasons. The first being the humiliation of chickening out and the second being Fred, George, and Wood were right behind her.

Madam Hooch was standing in the middle of the pitch, holding her broom in one hand and resting on a crate was her foot. A small silver whistle hung from her neck and she was currently staring at the Gryffindor team as they approached. Once the Slytherin team joined them, she addressed them all.

“Now, I want a nice fair game, all of you.” Kate couldn’t help but notice that she was speaking mainly to the Slytherin team Captain, Marcus Flint. He must have had some troll blood in him because

nobody looked like *that* naturally. She looked away and scanned the stands. There were Hermione, Neville, and Ron, sitting a good way up the stands. What look like a large bed sheet was held in front of them with the flickering words “Potter for President” on it. Kate smiled and turned back to Madam Hooch, who had the captains shaking hands.

“Mount your brooms.”

Kate slipped onto her Nimbus and crouched, ready to spring off at any moment. Madam Hooch let off a loud blast of her whistle and everyone was off. Kate shot straight up into the air and began to search for the Snitch.

“And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor—what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too—”

“JORDAN!”

“Sorry, Professor.”

Kate began to giggle softly at the Twin’s friend, Lee. It seemed to be his goal in life to make Professor McGonagall’s life difficult.

“And she’s really belting along up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood’s, last year only a reserve—back to Johnson and—no, the Slytherins have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes—Flint flying like an eagle up there—he’s going to sc—no, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor Keeper Wood and the Gryffindors take the Quaffle—that’s Chaser Katei Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and—OUCH—that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger—Quaffle taken by the Slytherins—That’s Adrian Pucey speeding off toward the goal posts, but he’s blocked by a second Bludger—sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can’t tell which—nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes—she’s really flying—dodges a speeding Bludger—the goal posts are ahead—come on, now, Angelina—Keeper Bletchy dives—misses—GYFFINDORS SCORE!”

Kate watched with glee as the Chasers, Beaters, Bludgers, and Quaffle flew around from her high vantage point. Of course, this was part of Wood's game plan. He wasn't going to use her to run interference on the Slytherin team. Instead, he wanted her to stay as far away from trouble as possible.

When Angelina scored, Kate had cheered along with everyone else but still kept her eyes scanning the pitch. Once, she caught sight of a flicker of gold, but it turned out to be one of the Weasley's watches. Another time, a Bludger, obviously thinking she hadn't seen enough action yet, came pelting her way. Fred went right after it as she dodged it smoothly and smashed it toward Flint.

"Slytherin in possession," Lee was saying, "Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys, and Chaser Bell, and speeds toward the—wait a minute—was that the Snitch?"

Kate was already in her dive before he had mentioned it. She'd seen the golden flicker as it whisked past Pucey, causing him to drop the Quaffle. The Slytherin Seeker, Terence Higgs had seen it too but he had delayed in shock at its sudden appearance, giving Kate quite a lead.

She was closing on the Snitch, its little wings fluttering madly as it darted around in no particular order. Suddenly, as if sensing her presence, it took off with amazing speed. Kate followed as fast as her Nimbus could take her. She was slowly gaining. Her hand reached out, stretching, hoping to get that much closer. Almost there—

WHAM! A roar of outrage ripped through the stadium. Marcus Flint had used his own body as a portable wall and well...used it. Kate, being how small she was, was no match for that wall of flesh and was sent careening away. She struggled with her broom's control and finally got it. She glanced around, the Snitch was gone. Madam Hooch was yelling at Flint and eventually ordered a free shot for Gryffindor.

All through this, Lee was having serious trouble not taking sides.

"So—after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating—"

“Jordan!” McGonagall growled, clearly audible over the megaphone Lee was using.

“I mean, after that open and revolting foul—”

“Jordan, I’m warning you—”

“All right, all right. Flint nearly kills Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I’m sure, so a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinnet, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue play, Gryffindor still in possession.”

Game play resumed in a normal fashion, with her circling the pitch and the constant battle for the Quaffle going on below. A Bludger was hit in her direction, which she dodged easily. Then, her broom gave a mighty lurch. It plummeted several feet before it regained control as if nothing had happened. After a few more feet of flight, it happened again, this time much harder.

Thinking something had gone wrong with her broom when Flint had hit it, she tried to turn it back toward the Gryffindor goal posts so they could call a time out. It was then, however, that she discovered her broom was no longer under her control. She couldn’t turn it or direct it at all. It zig-zaged her all across the field randomly, stopping suddenly in places as if it were trying to throw her off. Her tenacious grip that she used to do some of her more thrilling dives came in handy. And through her plight, Lee kept commenting.

“Slytherin in possession—Flint with the Quaffle—passes Spinnet—passes Bell—hit hard in the face by a Bludger, hope it broke his nose—only joking, Professor—Slytherins score—oh no...”

The Slytherins cheered loudly. No one had yet to realize that Kate was getting closer and closer to becoming a permanent addition to the pitch. Yet, as if the broom wanted to make sure of a certain job, it began to jerk higher, away from the game. If the fall hadn’t been fatal before, it sure was now.

Finally people started to point up towards her. Hundreds of binoculars flashed in her direction. Her broom swished violently, nearly sending her flying off. The game seemed to have stopped as everyone

watched. Fred and George even tried to fly up to rescue her but her broom would jump up several feet every time they got close, so they settled for circling below, ready to catch her if she fell.

Her broom, as if irritated with her tenacious grip, flipped tail-over-head, sending her swinging off, her left hand barely clinging to the broom. It swished back and forth several times, trying to knock her off. She was about to swing her right hand on when she caught sight of a glint of gold. With a grin, her right hand darted out and snatched the Golden Snitch.

Kate began to wave her right arm around in the air, indicating that she had gotten the Snitch, but everyone thought it was a panicked wave. "OI! FRED, GEORGE! I HAVE THE SNITCH!" she shouted down to the circling twins. Both their faces lit up and they began to wave their hands around too, trying to gain some attention. Finally, Lee made a comment on their odd behavior.

"I don't know what they're up to. It's not like yelling and waving your arms will help you get her down you two!" he said to the twins. Then, his eyes caught the glint of gold in Kate's hand. "I don't believe it! Kate Potter has captured the Snitch! And with only one hand on her broomstick!" he shouted to the crowd.

After that, her broom came back under her control and she swung herself up onto it, still holding the Snitch high. She was soon accosted by the Gryffindor Chasers and they became a large blob of scarlet, screaming mad women. When they landed, Fred and George quickly scooped her away from the girls and took turns in twirling her around in identical hugs. Wood even had the sensitivity to pat her on the back, telling her well done.

Only Marcus Flint had something to say about it. "She was disrupting the game! It should have been a time out!" Of course, this didn't stop Lee from shouting the score over and over. Gryffindor had won, one hundred seventy to forty.

Kate was soon commandeered by Ron and Hermione and they took her over to Hagrid's hut for a nice cup of tea. That's where they explained what they thought happened to her broom. Hagrid and Kate disagreed.

"It was Snape," Ron said. "Hermione and I saw him. He was cursing your broomstick, muttering, he wouldn't take his eyes off you."

"Rubbish," Hagrid said, which was exactly what Kate had been thinking. "Why would Snape do somethin' like that?"

Ron glanced at Kate before he continued. "Kate found out something about him," Ron said, cringing under Kate's glare but continuing on anyway. "He tried to get past that three headed dog on Halloween. It bit him. We—" Kate and Hermione glared at him. "Okay—I think he was trying to steal whatever it's guarding."

Hagrid dropped his teapot. "How do you know about Fluffy?"

"*Fluffy!*" Kate asked.

"Yeah—he's mine—bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year—I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the—"

"Yes?" they chorused.

"Now, don't ask me anymore," Hagrid said gruffly. "That's top secret, that is."

"But Snape's trying to *steal* it?"

"Ron! He isn't trying to steal it!" Kate cried in frustration. "Why would he?"

"Ummm..."

"Exactly!"

"Kate's got it right about him. He's been teachin' fer a long time now. He wouldn't try ter steal somethin' from Dumbledore."

"So why did he just try and kill Kate?" Hermione asked. "I know a jinx when I see one, Hagrid, I've read all about them! You've got to keep eye contact, and Snape wasn't blinking at all, I saw him!"

"And who else was staring at me Hermione? You know as well as I do that you don't have to mutter to perform a jinx," Kate replied. "In

fact, the only reason he'd have to mutter is if he were performing the *counter-jinx*."

"Well...I supposed you're right," Hermione conceded after a few moments. "It's just...it'd take someone really powerful to jinx a broom. I don't think there are any students that can do that."

"Who else was out there watching? I mean, Professors. I know McGonagall was out there and apparently, Snape was too. So, who else?"

"I think I saw Quirrell..." Hermione said slowly. "And...I knocked him over to get to Snape..."

"So it could have been Quirrell?"

"Would yeh three get it out of yer heads that a teacher is tryin' to steal something?" Hagrid asked hotly. "I don't know why Kate's broom was acting like that, but none of the teachers would try to kill her. Now, listen to me, all three of yeh—yer meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guardin', that's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel—"

"Aha!" Kate said triumphantly, "so there's someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, is there?"

Hagrid looked very angry with himself and the three of them soon left, not wanting to be in the same room with the large man.

Chapter Nine: Christmas? and the Mirror

Christmas was coming. Well, that's what everyone was saying. Kate didn't know exactly what it meant so she figured it was simply a wizarding holiday that she would get used to. On a morning in mid-December, Hogwarts woke up to several feet of snow that had fallen over night. Kate didn't register everyone else's delight about the stuff. It was cold and wet and was always the sign of winter.

Winters at the orphanage were...not nice. The walls were thin and so were their blankets. During the winter, the cold would seep in through the walls and the girls were forced to huddle together on various beds to keep warm. Of course, winter at Hogwarts wasn't nearly as bad. There were fires in the common rooms, keeping them warm and toasty and there was always hot food in the Great Hall for meal times.

She was, however, one of the few to not complain about the biting cold on the grounds and in the hallways. She'd grown accustomed to feeling the extremes of the weather and it didn't feel as bad to her as the others made it out to be. Potions was a different battlefield. If they hadn't had the small fires under their cauldrons, they surely would have frozen. There was a second problem with Potions. Malfoy.

"I do feel so sorry," he said one Potions class, "For all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they have no proper home."

He was looking directly at Kate as he spoke, as if he wanted her to rise to such a pitiful bating attempt. She had become numb to his taunting a while ago as he had turned to insulting her family, or lack there of, from insulting her control of a broomstick.

It was true that she wasn't going anywhere for "Christmas." She wasn't going to go to the orphanage again and there was nowhere else for her to go. Ron's parents were leaving for Romania to visit Charlie and Hermione was going to her house for the holidays. Kate had yet to ask the two of them what Christmas was exactly though and she kept hearing the word in people's conversations.

When they left the dungeons at the end of class, they found a large fir tree blocking the corridor ahead with two feet sticking out the bottom.

“Hi, Hagrid, want any help?” Ron asked, sticking his head through the branches.

“Nah, I’m all right, thanks, Ron.”

“Would you mind moving out of the way?” came a drawling voice from right behind them. Kate spun around and saw Malfoy swagger up the corridor. “Are you trying to earn some extra money, Weasley? Hoping to be gamekeeper yourself when you leave Hogwarts I suppose—That hut of Hagrid’s must seem like a palace compared to what your family’s used to.”

Kate stepped in front of Ron just in time. Snape was walking up the stairs and eyeing the group of Gryffindors around her coldly. Ron seemed to come to his senses just then and simply settled to glare at Malfoy. Snape left and Malfoy smirked at the three of them.

“Need some little girls to stand up for you now, Weasley?” he taunted. It was Ron’s turn to smirk as Kate slowly turned around. It wasn’t the wisest thing to do, making insinuations of Kate’s height. She was very sensitive on that subject. Thus, it was only to Malfoy’s surprise when Kate had her wand leveled at him

“What did you call me, Malfoy?” she asked softly, itching for him to do something stupid. Unfortunately, it was not to be as the message seemed to get through Malfoy’s thick skull. He sneered at them as he pushed past Hagrid and on up the corridor.

“Darn...I really wanted to hex him good right there too,” Kate said with a sigh.

Hagrid cleared his throat and moved the conversation to more cheerful things. “Cheer up! It’s nearly Christmas. Come on, I want ter show yeh the Great Hall.”

So Kate, Hermione, and Ron followed Hagrid into the Great Hall. Inside, Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick were busy magic-ing shiny and bright decorations all over the Hall.

“Ah, Hagrid, the last tree—put it in the far corner, would you?”

Hermione and Ron were “Ooo-ing” and “Ah-ing” at the decorations which left Kate to be confused at their significance. “I don’t—” Kate began as her two friends walked into the Hall for a better look. “—understand...” she finished softly to herself, “What’s Christmas?”

Hagrid, Hermione, and Ron came back across the Hall after Hagrid dropped off the last tree. What this tree was for was beyond Kate but there seemed to be eleven others around the room.

“How many days you got left until yer holidays?” Hagrid asked.

“Just one,” Hermione replied. “And that reminds me—Kate, Ron, we’ve got half an hour before lunch, we should be in the library.”

“Oh yeah, you’re right,” Ron said distractedly. He was still staring at the decorations around them.

“The library?” Hagrid asked, following them as they walked out of the Hall. “Just before the holidays? Bit keen, aren’t yeh?”

Kate smiled, breaking herself out of her pondering about Christmas. “We’re not doing school work, Hagrid. Ever since you let Flamel’s name slip, we’ve been scouring the library for him.”

“You *what*?” Listen here—I’ve told yeh—drop it. It’s nothin’ to you what that dog’s gaurdin’.”

“We just want to know who Nicolas Flamel is, that’s all,” Hermione said innocently.

“Unless, that is, if you’d like to save us the trouble and simply *tell* us,” Kate continued, edging a little closer to Hagrid, causing the giant man to take a step back.

“I’m sayin’ nothin’.”

“Just have to find out for ourselves, then,” Ron said, and they left Hagrid looking disgruntled and hurried off to the library.

They had indeed been searching books for Flamel’s name ever since Hagrid had let it slip, because how else were they going to find out

what that dog was guarding, or in Ron's case, what Snape was going to steal? The trouble was, it was very hard to know where to begin, not knowing what Flamel might have done to get himself into a book. He wasn't in *Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century*, or *Notable Magical Names of Our Time*; he was missing, too, from *Important Modern Magical Discoveries*, and *A Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry*. And then there was the sheer size of the library; tens of thousands of books; thousands of shelves; hundreds of narrow rows.

Hermione took out a list of subjects and titles she had decided to search while Ron strode off down a row of books and started pulling them off the shelves at random. Kate wandered over to the Restricted Section. She'd been wondering for a while if Flamel wasn't somewhere in there. Unfortunately, you needed a specially signed note from one of the teachers to look in any of the restricted books, and she knew they'd never get one. These were books containing powerful Dark Magic never taught at Hogwarts, and only read by older students studying advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"What are you looking for, Miss Potter?"

"Er..." Apparently her lack of response was not the answer Madam Pince was looking for.

"Well then, you'd better get out. Go on—out!"

Silently berating herself for not thinking of something, Kate left the library. They'd all agreed that asking Madam Pince about Flamel would probably be one of the least brilliant things for them to do. It wasn't a problem of her not being able to tell them, more of a safeguard against the teachers finding out about their little search.

Kate waited outside, contemplating on changing her hair and eye color to help the two look some more. It wasn't as if she was eager to begin the fruitless search once again but it was getting ridiculous. They'd been searching for two weeks now and hadn't found anything at all. Granted, they'd only had the times between periods to search but still, it wasn't really good for moral.

Five minutes later, Ron and Hermione joined her, shaking their heads.

"I wonder if we'll ever find him," Kate mused as they walked down the corridor toward the Great Hall.

"Who knows...you will keep looking over Christmas, won't you?" Hermione asked as they all sat down around the table.

"Yeah..." Kate said, her mind going in the other direction. "Hermione...Ron, I've been meaning to ask you two something..." she said slowly.

"What is it?" Ron asked just before stuffing a sandwich in his mouth.

"What's Christmas?"

Hermione dropped her goblet of pumpkin juice, sending an orange puddle to spread out on the table. Many people jumped from their seats and gave Hermione a glare. But, that was nothing to what Ron did. His first response was to splutter incoherently, which is pretty hard to do when one has a mouth full of sandwich. His second response was to get said sandwich out of his mouth so he could get on with his first response. Thus, his partially chewed food shot out of his mouth and landed ever so gracefully on top of Lavender Brown's head.

Ron had to duck underneath the table to avoid the plate that was thrown, which Kate was sure would have chopped his head clean off. The plate sailed over to the Ravenclaw table and impacted a third year boy in the back of the head. He quickly turned around and threw three sandwiches back at the Gryffindor table, hitting people indiscriminately. Very soon, the two tables were waged in one of the best food fights Hogwarts had ever seen.

During the confusion, Kate dragged her two friends out of the room and up towards the Gryffindor Common room. Her last images of the Hall were of Fred and George getting up on the table with their wands and directing the soaring food to make dive bombing attacks while Professor McGonagall tried to regain control.

They found a place around the common room fire and Ron and Hermione turned toward her.

"So what was that you were going on about?" Ron asked, looking confused.

"What. Is. Christmas?" Kate replied clearly. "I've been hearing it all over the place and, well, at first I thought it was some wizarding custom but then Hermione knew about it too so...I just don't know."

Without warning, Hermione broke down. Tears ran down her face and she flung herself over at Kate, nearly tackling her off the chair she was sitting in.

"T-that's so horrible!" she sobbed, nearly squeezing Kate to death.

"Hermione..." Kate wheezed, "air..." Hermione let go quickly and retreated back to her chair, wiping tears from her eyes.

"So, what is Christmas? You've done a great job in not telling me." Hermione glanced at Ron and Ron glanced at Hermione before they looked at her.

"Er...it's a bit hard to explain," Hermione began.

"Yeah...well, Christmas day is on the 25th," Ron said, gaining a glare from Hermione at his un-helpfulness.

"Christmas time is when...family's come together for the holidays. It's amazing that you don't know this..." she said distractedly. "People exchange presents and most of the time, there is a large dinner."

"But the presents are the best part," Ron said with a grin. Hermione hit him in the arm rather forcefully. "Ow!...what?"

Kate was silent. *So, it's a family thing? No wonder I don't know what it is,* she thought bitterly. "So that's why everyone is all excited? Getting presents and seeing family?" Hermione nodded. "Oh...we never had a Christmas at the orphanage. I guess it's understandable. We had no family."

Hermione looked as though she was going to say something but Kate stood up before she could get a word in. "I'm going up to bed. See you two in the morning." With that, she made her way up to the girl's

dormitories, shifted Hazel aside, and lay down, pulling her curtains closed around her.

Sleep came easily to her and her dreams were punctuated with visions of a red haired woman next to a large, green tree.

||||| ((I hope this border works...sheesh, nothing else does))

Despite Hermione's insistence that they keep looking for Flamel over the holidays, Kate and Ron were having too much fun to think too much on the subject. They each had a dormitory to themselves and the common room held only a couple people that opted to stay at Hogwarts over the summer. Ron taught her the joys of cooking things on an open fire and they had much fun in the evenings spearing various items on a toasting fork while they plotted ways to get Malfoy expelled, which would be fun even if they didn't work.

Ron also started teaching Kate how to play wizard chess. It was exactly like Muggle chess (which Kate had never played either) except that the figures were alive, which made it a lot like directing troops in battle. Ron's set was very old and battered. Like everything else he owned, it had once belonged to someone else in his family—in this case, his grandfather. However, old chessmen weren't a drawback at all. Ron knew them so well he never had trouble getting them to do what he wanted.

Kate, on the other hand, was playing with chessmen she'd borrowed from Seamus before he left. To say the least, they didn't trust her at all. The fact that she was still trying to figure out how to move each piece and which squares were which, it wasn't surprising that the chessmen would shout advice to her. As it turned out, this advice tended to shorten the length of the games.

On Christmas Eve, Kate and Ron joined Fred and George and several other students out on the grounds for a spectacular snowball fight. The Weasleys were determined to get her to love the snow, as she wasn't too fond of it due to the lack of warming qualities.

That was how the morning and afternoon was spent and everyone returned to their common rooms tired, wet, cold, and oddly fulfilled. That evening was very subdued as everyone was far too tired to do

much of anything. By nine, the common room was deserted and everyone was getting nice and warm in their beds.

In fact, Kate felt like she had just gone to sleep when a very loud noise woke her up. It sounded something like this:

“Kate! Kate, it’s Christmas! Kate, wake up—AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHhhhhh...!” Ronald Weasley had attempted to run up the girl’s staircase.

His yell succeeded in waking up the entire tower, and one by one, girls came sliding down the now smooth staircase giggling. Kate stood at the top of the stairs turned slide and looked down at Ron.

“Go on, you can laugh too,” he grumbled. After a few moments, he stood up and looked at her. “What’s up with you?” Kate had been staring at him from the point just before the slide started, her eyes wide and a huge grin plastered on her face.

“I GOT PRESENTS!” she screamed. And then, before Ron could mutter about the insanity of girls, she disappeared back up to her dorm only to come back a couple minutes later carrying a pile of presents in her arms.

Ron and Kate took up a place near the fire and set their respected piles next to themselves. As if cued by someone, both attacked their presents violently, ripping the paper off each one in turn.

Kate’s first was from Hagrid and it contained a small wooden flute that looked as if he had carved it himself. She gave it an experimental blow, causing it to let out an owl like sound. She was about to go for her second one when a small black ball of fir jumped onto her discarded wrapping paper.

“Happy Christmas, Hazel!” she said with a smile. Her next present was a thick card that looked to be from a muggle store. She tore open the envelope carefully and pulled the card out. The card was a “Season’s Greetings” card with a Santa on the front. Inside were two notes and the card was signed by Mitchell and Harry.

Dear Kit,

Happy Christmas kiddo! I can't say all that I want to here and your present really can't be transported in a gift like this. Think you can wait 'till the summer time? See you in a couple months.

Mitchell

"I wonder what he's talking about," she mumbled to herself as she carefully set the card with Mitchell's letter on top of the flute. She turned to the second letter.

Hey Katherine,

It's me, Harry! You will never guess what happened! My dad is in jail! Okay, so this might not be something most people like to celebrate but...yeah. Anyway, that's not what I wanted to tell you. After you left, Mitchell got in contact with some people, dunno who they were, but they brought up some law thing and said I couldn't live at Number Four anymore. So, that means I was a genuine orphan...for about thirty minutes. Mitchell adopted me! Can you believe it!

Anyway, Happy Christmas and I'll see you this summer.

Harry

"Wow..."

"What?" Ron asked thickly as he was busy guzzling down some sweets. He looked at the note in her hands, tilted his head slightly and read it. "Who's Harry?"

"My cousin."

"Oh..."

"Never mind, I've got some more stuff to open!"

She moved onto a particularly lumpy parcel and was just about to rip it open when Ron gave a groan. "What?"

“I think I know what that is. I owed my Mum, saying that I didn’t think you were going to get any presents this year...so she sent you a Weasley sweater.” He groaned again.

“What’s so bad about that?” she asked, raising an eyebrow at him before ripping the paper open. Inside was a thick, hand-knitted emerald green sweater and a large box of homemade fudge.

“Every year she makes us a sweater,” Ron said, unwrapping his own, “and mine’s *always* maroon.”

“That’s really nice of her,” Kate said while chewing on a piece of the amazing fudge and pulling the wonderfully warm sweater over her head.

Her next present also contained sweets—a large box of Chocolate Frogs from Hermione. This only left one last parcel. Kate picked it up and felt it, determined to make her Christmas experience last as long as possible. It was very light, she noticed as she unwrapped it carefully.

Something fluid and silvery gray went slithering to the floor where it lay in gleaming folds. Ron gasped.

“I’ve heard of those,” he said in a hushed voice, dropping the box of Every Flavor Beans he’d gotten from Hermione. “If that’s what I think it is—they’re really rare, and *really* valuable.”

“What is it?” Kate picked up the shining, silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to the touch, like water woven into material.

“It’s an invisibility cloak,” Ron said, a look of awe on his face. “I’m sure it is—try it on.”

Kate threw the cloak around her shoulders and Ron gave a yell. “It *is*! Look down!”

She did so and had to stifle a scream when she found her body wasn’t there anymore. She brought one hand out of the cloak to try to feel where her body was and went wide eyed at the sight of her sweater clad arm floating all by itself.

"I can still see your head," Ron said, still staring at her. "Try pulling the hood up."

Kate reached back and pulled the hood over her head. Ron gasped again. "Well?"

"Oh geez...this is awesome! I can't even see you!" he said, grinning at her but obviously staring at the wall behind her. "There's a note!" he said suddenly. "A note fell out of it!"

Kate pulled the cloak off and seized the note. Written in narrow, loopy writing she had never seen before were the following words:

Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.

A very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature. Kate stared at the note while Ron admired the cloak.

"I'd give *anything* for one of these," he said. "*Anything*. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Kate replied. She felt strange. The only memories she'd had of her parents were them getting killed and now all of the sudden she gets her father's invisibility cloak for Christmas? It didn't make much sense.

Before she could delve any deeper into her thoughts, the twins came bounding down the stairs. They were about to make a jovial greeting to the two of them when their eyes landed on the silvery material puddled at Kate's feet.

"Is that what I think it is?" Fred asked in awe.

George didn't even seem capable of speaking as he slowly walked forward, and with a look, was granted permission to pick up the cloak. Reverently, he held it up and examined it.

“Wow, Kate. Who sent you this?” he asked, handing it back to her with the same amount of reverence.

“Dunno. No signature.”

“You have to let us borrow that sometime. With that and our mastery of the corridors...” Fred trailed off, a blissful smile appearing on his face. His eyes then caught the sweater she was wearing.

“Hey, George! Kate’s got a Weasley sweater too!”

George whipped around and grinned. Kate just noticed that both of them were wearing blue sweaters, one with a large yellow F on it and the other G.

“Kate’s is better than ours though,” Fred commented, comparing his sweater with Kate’s. “She obviously makes more of an effort if you’re not family.

“Why aren’t you wearing yours, Ron?” George demanded. “Come on, get it on, they’re lovely and warm.”

“I hate maroon,” Ron moaned halfheartedly as he pulled it over his head.

“You haven’t got a letter on yours,” George observed. “I supposed she thinks you don’t forget your name. But we’re not stupid—we know we’re called Gred and Forge.”

“What’s all this noise?”

Kate was quick to shove her cloak underneath the chair as Percy stuck his head down the staircase. He had clearly gotten halfway through unwrapping his presents as he, too, carried a lumpy sweater over his arm. Fred and George were on him in an instant and Fred seized his sweater.

“P for prefect! Get it on, Percy, come on, we’re all wearing ours, even Kate got one.”

“I—don’t—want—” said Percy thickly, as the twins forced the sweater over his head, knocking his glasses askew.

“And you’re not sitting with the prefects today, either,” George said. “Christmas is a time for family.”

Kate’s face fell slightly as she heard that last remark but she pulled her smile back up before anyone could notice. In fact, it would have been difficult not to smile as the twins frog-marched Percy back up the stairs with his arms pinned to his side by his sweater.

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Kate had never in her life, ever experienced something remotely close to a Christmas dinner. A hundred fat, roast turkeys; mountains of roast and boiled potatoes; platters of chipolatas; tureens of buttered peas; silver boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce—and stacks of wizard crackers every few feet along the table. These fantastic party favors were wonderfully entertaining, as demonstrated by Fred, when he decided to pull one with Kate. The cracker went off with a blast like a cannon, covering the two of them in blue smoke. When it cleared, she discovered a rear admiral’s hat and several live, white mice. Up at the High Table, Dumbledore had swapped his pointed wizard’s hat for a flowered bonnet, and was chuckling merrily at a joke Professor Flitwick had just read him.

Flaming Christmas puddings followed the turkey. Percy nearly broke his teeth on a silver sickle embedded in his slice. Kate watched in amusement as Hagrid got redder and redder in the face as he called for more wine, finally kissing Professor McGonagall on the cheek, who, to Kate’s amazement, giggled and blushed, her top hat lopsided.

When Kate was finally able to leave the table (Fred and George waylaid her before she got up, insisting that they be able to test her cloak that week), she was laden down with a stack of things out of the crackers, including a pack of non-explodable, luminous balloons, a Grow-Your-Own-Warts kit, and her own new wizard chess set. The white mice that seemed to have come with every cracker had disappeared and she had a nasty feeling they were going to end up as Mrs. Norris’s Christmas dinner.

Once again, Kate and the Weasleys had a furious snowball fight to let off some of the holiday steam. After the victors finally wore out the losers (in other words, after Fred and George started using magic), they returned to the Gryffindor Common room and more importantly, the fire. Kate then lost spectacularly to Ron as she attempted to break in her new chess set. She did have a slight inkling that if Percy hadn't been trying to help, she wouldn't have lost so badly.

After a meal of turkey sandwiches, crumpets, trifle, and Christmas cake, everyone felt too full and sleepy to do much before bed except sit and watch Percy chase Fred and George all over Gryffindor tower because they'd stolen his prefect badge.

It had been Kate's best Christmas ever. Okay, so it had been her *only* Christmas ever. Yet, despite all the marvelous celebrations and distractions, something had been nagging at the back of her mind all day. It wasn't until she climbed into bed and was free to think about it that she remembered the invisibility cloak and whoever sent it.

Her dorm room was quite empty as none of the other girls in her year had decided to stay over the holidays. This left her with plenty of time to think about who had sent the cloak. Well, they obviously knew her father and were a personal friend if he trusted them to hold onto such a rare object. She pulled the cloak out of her trunk and ran her hands over the silky smooth fabric.

Use it well.

That was what the note had said. "Use it well?" she muttered to herself, watching as the moonlight caught the silvery material and reflected, causing the cloak to glow slightly. Then a thought smashed through all of her pondering. *FLAMEL!* She could use the cloak to look through the Library unobserved. With a grin that came from the inner mischief-maker inside, Kate sprang out of her bed and whipped the cloak around herself, pulled up the hood, grabbed her wand, and dashed down the stairs.

She slowed just outside the portrait hole as this was the first time she'd gone out alone. No Fred or George to help her if she got into a tight spot. With a steadying breath, she pushed open the portrait and slipped out.

“Who’s there?” squawked the Fat Lady. Kate said nothing and she quickly made her way down the corridor.

She was on her way toward the library as soon as her feet hit the corridor. The school was eerily empty. No Peeves darting about, no Filch, no Mrs. Norris, no...anybody. It was pretty creepy. The only thing that kept her from whisking around and dashing back up to the castle was the fact that she was quite invisible.

Unfortunately, the library didn’t help much. It was darker than the corridors, almost pitch-black, and was definitely eerie. She suspected that no student in their right mind would come down into the place at night.

“Lumos...” she whispered, setting the tip of her wand alight. The thin, wavering silver light barely pierced the darkness around her that seemed to be closing in around her. Kate dismissed the idea and moved quickly past the rows and over to the Restricted Section. She stepped over the rope separating the Section from the rest of the library and began her search. Looking at the titles didn’t help much as many were in different languages or had no title at all. The ones that did have titles she wished didn’t.

She scanned the books from the top of the book shelves to the bottom, holding her wand close to each one so she could make it out better in the darkness. She leaned closer to a large silver and black volume that caught her eye. Looking around carefully, she pulled it from its place on the book shelf and looked it over. Its binding was made of an odd material, sort of like velvet but different; a little courser.

Kate shrugged and flipped the book over to look at what should have been the cover. It simply had black and silver patterns sketched on it. Carefully, almost reverently, she flipped the book open to the first page. A disturbing silence filled the room as she ran her hand cautiously over the blank first page. As soon as her fingers touched the book, a cold sensation washed over her and words began to appear. Suddenly, renting the silence open as effectively as an explosion, a bloodcurdling scream erupted from the book.

Startled, Kate dropped it to the ground and nearly let out a shriek of surprise but fought it down and quickly picked the book up again and snapped it shut. It continued to scream as she shoved it back into its slot, muffling the screams slightly. A door bursting open and pounding footsteps rang through the library.

“Nox,” Kate whispered just in time. Seconds later, Filch rounded the corner to look down the aisle of the Restricted section. Kate deftly slipped under his arm as he was scanning for the source of the noise and left the library quickly. She ran and ran, not really paying attention to where she was going. The book had startled her, badly.

She came to a sudden halt in front of a tall suit of armor. Perhaps because it was dark, she didn’t recognize where she was at all. She knew there was a suit of armor near the kitchens but she must be five floors above there.

“You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night, and somebody’s been in the library—Restricted Section.”

Kate’s breath hitched slightly. *Stupid, stupid, stupid! Filch knows every short cut!* she admonished to herself. The familiar voice of Professor Snape answered. “The Restricted Section? Well, they can’t be far, we’ll catch them.”

The last person she wanted to be caught by was Snape. Not because he was supposedly the meanest professor in the school but because he had expressed his severe dislike for trouble-makers almost every day. She stood there, wide eyed as Snape and Filch came around the corner. They couldn’t see her of course, but that didn’t stop her from being solid and it was a very narrow corridor.

She backed away quietly, making almost no sound as she did so. A door stood ajar to her left. It was her only hope. She slipped through it easily, being the smallest in the school. The two walked straight past, and Kate leaned against the wall, letting out a breath she didn’t know she had been holding as their footsteps died away. That had been close, very close. It was a few seconds before she noticed anything about the room she had hidden in.

It looked like an unused classroom. The dark shapes of desks and chairs were piled against the walls, and there was an upturned wastepaper basket—but propped against the wall facing her was something that didn't look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*.

Her panic now long gone, Kate moved closer to the mirror. The inscription seemed odd and sounded like utter nonsense when she sounded it out under her breath. In fact, she was so engrossed in looking at the words that she didn't notice the other function of the mirror.

She had to clap her hands over her mouth to stop herself from screaming. She whirled around. Her heart was pounding far more furiously than when the book had screamed—for she had seen not only herself in the mirror, but two other people standing right behind her.

But the room was empty. Breathing very fast, she turned slowly back to the mirror.

There she was, reflected in it, white and scared-looking, and there, reflected behind her, were two others. Kate looked over her shoulder—but still, no one was there. Or were they all invisible, too? She banished the thought. She would have walked right through them.

She looked at the mirror again. The woman standing right behind her reflection was smiling at her and waving. She reached out a hand and felt the air behind her. If she really was there, he'd touch her, their reflections were so close together, but she only felt air—she and the man standing next to her only existed in the mirror.

She was a very pretty woman. She had dark hair that flowed over her shoulders and stopped just above her shoulder blades and her eyes—*her eyes are just like mine*, Kate thought, edging a little closer to the glass, willing herself not to reach out a hand and simply fall through into the mirror. Her eyes were the same bright green as her

own—exactly the same shape and a little red from crying. The smile stayed in place but she still cried. The tall, thin, black-haired man standing next to her put his arm around her. He wore glasses and his hair was very untidy, sticking up in the back slightly.

Kate turned her gaze back to the woman and drank her in with her eyes. There was something extremely familiar about her. And then Kate understood. “Mum?” she said in a half choked voice. “Dad?” They just looked at her, smiling.

She had caught the vague statements that she looked just like her mother but she thought it was just being nice. Kate *did* look like her mother. Almost like a miniature clone. She had the same small nose, the same lips, and the same eyes, the patch of freckles spread thinly across her nose, the same elegant eyebrow, and even the same silky hair. The only difference was the midnight black hair over the dark red.

How long she stood there, she didn’t know. The reflections did not fade and she looked and looked, eventually building up the courage to touch the cold glass of the mirror. Her mum, Lily she remembered, placed a hand on the glass just where hers was and a fresh bout of tears hit the mother and daughter. Her father watched on, giving Lily a comforting squeeze. Kate was disappointed that she didn’t know his name.

A distant noise brought her back to her senses. She couldn’t stay here, she had to find her way back to bed. She tore her eyes away from her mother’s face, whispered, “I’ll come back,” and hurried from the room.

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“You could have woken me up,” said Ron crossly.

“You can come tonight, I’m going back, I want to show you the mirror.”

“I’d like to see your mom and dad,” Ron said eagerly.

Kate gave a distracted smile. "I want you to see them too. Mostly my mum though. It's crazy how much—you'll just have to see."

"Shame about not finding Flamel, though," he said. "Have some bacon or something, why aren't you eating?"

Kate was clearly making him concerned because she usually out ate him everyday. But she couldn't eat. She had seen her parents and would be seeing them again that night. She had almost forgotten about Flamel. It didn't seem very important anymore. Who cared what the three-headed dog was guarding? What did it matter if it was stolen?

"Are you all right?" Ron asked. "You look odd."

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What Kate feared most was that she might not be able to find the mirror room again. With Ron covered in the cloak too, they had to walk much more slowly the next night. Kate had a pretty good idea of where she was going but it still took nearly an hour of wandering the corridors .

"I'm freezing," said Ron. "Let's forget it and go back."

"No!" Kate hissed. "I know it's here somewhere."

They passed a ghost of a tall witch gliding in the opposite direction, but saw no one else. Just as Ron started moaning that his feet were dead with cold, Kate spotted the suit of armor.

"It's here—just here—yes!"

They pushed the door open. Kate dropped the cloak from around her shoulders and ran to the mirror. There they were. Her mother and father beamed at the sight of her and her right hand slowly stretched out to once again meet her mother's through the glass.

"See?" Kate whispered almost reverently.

"I can't see anything."

“Look! Look at them...” she whispered, still transfixed at the sight of her mother.

“I can only see you.”

“Look at it properly,” she said with irritation. “Go on, stand where I am.”

Kate stepped aside, but with Ron in front of the mirror, she couldn’t see her family anymore, just Ron in his paisley pajamas.

Ron, though, was staring transfixed at his image.

“Look at me!” he said.

“Can you see your family?”

“No—I’m alone—but I’m different—I look older—and I’m Head Boy!”

Kate frowned. “*What?*”

“I am—I’m wearing the badge like Bill used to—and I’m holding the house cup and the Quidditch cup—I’m Quidditch captain, too!”

Ron tore his eyes away from this splendid sight to look excitedly at Kate.

“Do you think this mirror shows the future?”

“No,” Kate said flatly. “Last time I checked, my parents were dead.” She was rather disappointed in the mirror now. Not only could only one person use it at one time but it didn’t show the same thing each time. She sighed, mulling it over in her mind, trying to figure out what it did. Some of the enchantment that had surrounded seeing her parents had died away. Yes, she still wanted to see them but it seemed like the mirror was just...tricking her.

As Ron ogled himself, Kate sat down on the floor and leaned against one of the many desks in the room. She began to hum softly, imagining the mother she remembered dimly. There was something different about the mother in her memory and the one in the mirror.

The Lily she remembered had warm, caring, sparkling eyes; something the mirror Lily lacked.

A sudden noise outside in the corridor put an end to Ron's gazing and Kate's humming.

"Quick!"

Ron threw the cloak back over them as the luminous eyes of Mrs. Norris came round the door. Ron and Kate stood quite still, both thinking the same thing—did the cloak work on cats? After what seemed like an age, she turned and left.

"This isn't safe—she might have gone for Filch, I bet she heard us. Come on."

"Yeah...I just want to know what that mirror does..."

"Oh c'mon Kate, don't go all Hermione on me," Ron groaned as they made their way out of the room and up toward the tower.

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The snow still hadn't melted the next morning.

"Want to play chess, Kate?" said Ron.

"Nope."

"Why don't we go down and visit Hagrid?"

"No...I'm busy..."

"Kate, it's hopeless. You're not going to find out what that mirror does. Don't go back tonight."

"Why not? How else am I going to figure out what it does without studying it?"

"I dunno, I've just got a bad feeling about it—and anyway, you just want to get a look at your mum again."

“Ron...the memories I have are much better than that.”

“Oh...well, you still might be caught. I mean, you’ve had several close shaves already. Filch, Snape, and Mrs. Norris are wandering around. So what if they can’t see you? What if they walk into you? What if you knock something over?”

“You sound like Hermione,” Kate said with a grin.”

“I’m serious, Kate, don’t go.”

Kate ignored him and continued skimming through a book she had checked out of the library on magical artifacts. It had everything in it, even several dark items. “Blood-quill? Ron, look at this.”

Kate swung the book around and pointed to a passage in the book underneath a drawing of a quill writing on parchment and someone’s hand being cut open.

Historically a recent dark artifact, the Blood-quill is an illegal brand of quill enchanted with a minor Taping Charm, allowing it to draw on the blood of the user. Useful for signing blood documents without the hassle of using knives. The quill leaves a small incision on the back of the user’s hand, causing moderate amounts of pain. The wound quickly heals over but if the quill is used repeatedly over long periods of times, scarring will occur.

The Blood-quill became classified as a dark artifact when it began being used as a minor torture device, forcing prisoners to cut open their own skin repeatedly. Using a Blood-quill on another person is punishable by up to ten years in Azkaban prison.

“You are way too much like Hermione sometimes, Kate,” Ron said, shaking his head and going back to building a card castle out of Exploding Snap.

Kate shrugged and continued flipping through the book.

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The third night, she found her way more quickly than before, although it did take her much longer to walk down there as she was laden with a couple heavy books and handfuls of parchment.

She quietly slipped into the room and looked around before letting the cloak slip to the floor. Eager to get started, Kate dashed up to the mirror, gave the mirror Lily a fleeting smile and opened the books to marked pages. She was just writing down the inscription when a voice called out from behind her.

“So—back again, Katherine?”

Kate felt as if her insides had turned to ice. She looked up and smiling at her from behind her parents was the reflection of Albus Dumbledore.

“I—I didn’t see you, sir,” she said uncomfortably, slowly standing up from her position on the floor.

“Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you,” said Dumbledore with a smile.

“So,” he said, slipping off the desk he’d been watching on to stand next to her before the mirror, “you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised.”

“I didn’t know it was called that, sir.”

“But, I expect you’ve realized by now what it does?”

“Well...I’ve been working on it. It shows me my parents—”

“And it showed your friend Ron himself as Head Boy.”

“How did you know—”

“I don’t need a cloak to become invisible,” said Dumbledore gently. “Now, can you think what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?”

Kate thought for a moment, looked down at the copied inscription, and then back at the mirror. Something odd caught her eye in the

reflection of herself, holding the inscription. She scanned the words in the reflection, contemplating them for a few moments, and smiled, finally understanding.

“I show not your face but your hearts desire,” she read.

“Very good, Katherine, much more than I would have expected from any student, much less a first year,” Dumbledore said. “Yet, you seem to be resisting its pull to lose yourself in it. Would you care to explain?”

“Well, the mirror shows me my parents. I don’t remember my dad too well but I have several vivid memories of my mum. The mirror Lily doesn’t have the same...warmth in her eyes as my real mum does in my dreams.”

“Ah, a wonderful countermeasure for such a device. But, just in case, I am moving the Mirror to a new home tomorrow. I do not think I need to tell you to not go looking for it. Yet, if you do face it once again, you will be prepared for what it has for you. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don’t you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?”

Kate stooped down and scooped up the cloak.

“Sire—Professor Dumbledore? Can I ask you something?”

“Obviously, you’ve just done so,” Dumbledore smiled. “You may ask me one more thing, however.”

“What do you see when you look in the mirror?”

“I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks.”

Kate stared, fighting down a bout of giggles.

“One can never have enough socks,” said Dumbledore. “Another Christmas has come and gone and I didn’t get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books.”

On her way back to bed, Kate couldn't help but think that Dumbledore wasn't being entirely truthful. But, then, she thought, it had been a very personally question. Hazel snuggled up into her neck and began to purr softly, eventually lulling Kate to sleep.

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Chapter Ten: Nicolas Flamel

Dumbledore had convinced Kate not to go looking for the Mirror of Erised again, and for the rest of Christmas, she didn't use the invisibility cloak. That didn't mean, however, that she didn't give the twins the chance to cause some real havoc with it. Still, even with all the distracting pranks going on all throughout the remaining days of the holidays, she had nightmares. She kept seeing her mother's last stand against Voldemort in more and more detail each time until she could clearly make out his features. However, whenever she woke up, she'd quickly forget what exactly she had seen in the dream, often times only remembering screams and a flash of green light.

"You see, Dumbledore was right, that mirror could drive you mad," Ron said when she told him about the dreams. She silently vowed never to confide such details in him again.

Hermione, who came back the day before term started, took a different view on things. She was torn between horror at the idea of Kate being out of the bed, roaming the school three nights in a row ("If Filch had caught you!"), and disappointment that she hadn't at least found out who Nicolas Flamel was.

They had almost given up hope of ever finding Flamel in a library book, even though Kate was still sure she'd read the name somewhere. Once term had started, they were back to skimming through books for ten minutes during their breaks. Kate had even less time than the other two, because Quidditch practice had started again.

Wood was working the team harder than ever. Even the endless rain that had replaced the snow couldn't dampen his spirits. The Weasleys complained that Wood was becoming a fanatic, but Kate was on Wood's side...sort of. If they won their next match, against Hufflepuff, they would overtake Slytherin in the house championship for the first time in seven years. Quite apart from wanting to win, Kate found she had fewer nightmares when she was dead tired after training.

Then, during one particularly wet and muddy practice session, Wood gave the team some bad news. He'd just gotten very angry with the

Weasleys, who kept dive-bombing each other and pretending to fall off their brooms.

“Will you stop messing around!” he yelled. “That’s exactly the sort of thing that’ll lose us the match! Snape’s refereeing this time, and he’ll be looking for any excuse to knock points off Gryffindor!”

George really did fall off his broom at these words.

“*Snape’s* refereeing?” he spluttered through a mouthful of mud. “When’s he ever refereed a Quidditch match? He’s not going to be fair if we might overtake Slytherin.”

The rest of the team landed next to George to complain, too. Kate was torn, however. Snape really wasn’t horrible to her at all, although she had doubts that such kindness wouldn’t extend to Quidditch.

“It’s not *my* fault,” said Wood. “We’ve just got to make sure we play a clean game, so Snape hasn’t got an excuse to pick on us.”

Kate thought that as likely as Snape frolicking around the castle singing Christmas carols and handing out presents.

The rest of the team hung back to talk to one another as usual at the end of practice, but Kate excused herself from the rest of the team and headed straight back to the Gryffindor common room, where she found Ron and Hermione playing chess. Chess was the only thing Hermione ever lost at, something Ron thought was very good for her.

“Don’t talk to me for a moment,” said Ron when Kate sat down next to Hermione, “I need to concen—” He had glanced up and seen the preoccupied look on Kate’s face. “What’s up?”

With a sigh, Kate told the other two about Snape’s sudden interest in becoming a Quidditch referee.

“Don’t play,” said Hermione at once.

“Say you’re ill,” said Ron.

“Pretend to break your leg,” Hermione suggested.

“Really break your leg,” said Ron.

“What are you two going on about now?” Kate demanded, looking back and forth between the two. They gave each other knowing looks and then turned back toward Kate. “Oh, this isn’t about that nonsense of Snape wanting to kill me is it?”

“Why else would he want to referee now of all times?” Ron demanded, looking triumphant that he’d found a solid argument.

“Will you give it a rest? Why would he need to ref if he could simply blast me from my broom in the stands?”

Hermione and Ron didn’t get a chance to answer, however, because at that moment, Neville toppled into the common room. How he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone’s guess, because his legs had been stuck together with what they recognized at once as the Leg-Locker Curse. He must have had to bunny hop all the way up to Gryffindor tower.

Everyone fell over laughing, except for two girls, who rushed to his side. Hermione looked worried but Kate looked like she wanted to do serious bodily damage to someone. With a glare from her, the common room fell silent and then went back to its business. Hermione performed the countercurse effectively and Neville’s legs sprang apart.

“What happened?” Hermione asked as the two girls led him over to sit where they had with Ron.

“Malfoy,” Neville said shakily. “I met him outside the library. He said he’d been looking for someone to practice that on.”

“Go to Professor McGonagall!” Hermione urged Neville. “Report him!”

Neville shook his head.

“I don’t want more trouble,” he mumbled.

“You’ve got to stand up to him, Neville!” said Ron. “He’s used to walking all over people, but that’s no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier.”

“There’s no need to tell me I’m not brave enough to be in Gryffindor, Malfoy’s already done that,” Neville choked out.

Kate felt in the pocket of her robes and pulled out a Chocolate Frog, the very last one from the box Hermione had given her for Christmas. She gave it to Neville, who looked as if he might cry.

“You’re worth twelve of Malfoy,” Kate said. “The Sorting Hat chose you for Gryffindor, didn’t it? And where’s Malfoy? In stinking Slytherin.”

Neville’s lips twitched in a weak smile as he unwrapped the frog.

Thanks, Kate...I think I’ll go to bed...D’you want the card? I don’t know if you collect them or not,” he said, handing her the small card that came with every Chocolate Frog.

As Neville walked away, Kate looked at the Famous Wizard card, always entranced on how the pictures in the wizarding world moved.

“Dumbledore,” she said. “I remember getting one of him on the tra—”

She gasped and flipped the card around. With a wide grin, she then looked up at Ron and Hermione.

“I’ve found him!” she whispered. “I’ve found Flamel! I *told* you I’d read the name somewhere before, I read it on the train coming here—listen to this: ‘Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon’s blood, *and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel!*’”

Kate gave Hermione a significant look and, with no warning to Ron, Hermione jumped to her feet. She hadn’t looked so excited since they’d gotten back the marks for their very first piece of homework.

“Stay there!” she said, more for Ron’s benefit than for Kate’s, and she sprinted up the stairs to the girls’ dormitories. Kate barely had the time to start to giggle at Ron’s bemused face when Hermione came dashing back, and enormous old book in her arms.

“I never thought to look in here!” she whispered excitedly. “I got this out of the library weeks ago for a bit of light reading.”

“*Light?*” said Ron, but Hermione told him to be quiet until she’d looked something up, and started flicking frantically through the pages, muttering to herself. Kate had moved so she could see over her friend’s shoulder while Ron still occupied the chair with his arms folded.

At last, she found what she was looking for.

“I knew it! I *knew* it!”

“Am I allowed to speak yet?” said Ron grumpily. Hermione ignored him but Kate gave him a sympathetic smile, silently indicating that it was Hermione.

“Nicolas Flamel,” she whispered dramatically, “is the *only known maker of the Philosopher’s Stone!*”

This didn’t have quite the desired effect she’d expected.

“The what?” said Ron. Kate was simply reading the passage over Hermione’s shoulder.

“Oh, *honestly*, don’t you read? Look—read that, there.”

She pushed the book toward Ron, causing Kate to give her friend a mock glare as she had to adjust to the book’s position. “Thanks, Hermione,” she said before she bent over to read again, tucking a strand of loose hair behind her ear to keep it from falling onto the page.

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher’s Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers.

The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

"See?" said Hermione, when Kate and Ron had finished. "The dog must be guarding Flamel's Philosopher's Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they're friends and he knew someone was after it, that's why he wanted the Stone moved out of Gringotts!"

"A stone that makes gold and stops you from ever dying!" said Ron. "No wonder Snape's after it! *Anyone* would want it."

"Ron! How many times—"

"Yes, yes, Kate, I know. It's not Snape trying to steal it," Ron said in an unconvincing voice.

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The next morning in Defense Against the Dark Arts, while copying down different ways of treating werewolf bites, Kate and Ron were discussing what they'd do with a Philosopher's Stone if they had one. It wasn't until Ron said he'd buy his own Quidditch team did he remember about Snape and the upcoming match.

"I'm going to play," she told Ron and Hermione. "He's not going to do anything and even if he *were* trying to kill me, he wouldn't do it in the middle of a Quidditch game. He has us down there for hours in the dungeons."

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As the match drew nearer, Ron and Hermione continued to try to convince her to not play. Each time, she'd shoot them down, saying that Snape wouldn't do anything in the middle of the Quidditch match.

Also, a bout of nerves had overcome her and the rest of the team. The idea of overtaking Slytherin in the house championship was wonderful, no one had done it for seven years, but would they be allowed to, with such a biased referee?

To relieve said stress, Kate, Fred, and George set out on a pranking spree, hitting the Slytherins as many times before the upcoming match. Kate was certain though, that they'd been seen a couple times, as all three of them couldn't fit under the cloak. One sickening time, she'd thought she'd seen Snape at the end of the corner, looking like he wanted to kill her or something but when she had looked back, he was gone and she forgot about the strange vision.

Strangeness seemed to be in high supply lately, as in Potions, she'd lost her first points ever. Snape had been especially ill-tempered that day and had snapped at her, costing her five points, for turning her spoon one too many turns to the left. The Slytherins had seemed gleeful at this as it seemed as if the Golden Girl from Gryffindor no longer held sway over their Head of House. She was worried that maybe he had found out about the Philosopher's Stone, but Kate didn't see how he could. An odd thought crossed her mind. Maybe he was angry at her for pulling pranks. But if he was, why hadn't he given her a detention yet?

IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII ((A/N: I am deliberately not putting in Ron and Hermione's little snippets because I prefer to do this relatively from Kate's point of view.))

Kate knew, even with all of her reassurances, when they wished her good luck outside the locker rooms the next afternoon, that Ron and Hermione were wondering whether they'd ever see each other alive again. It was rather annoying that those two couldn't get it out of their heads that she was going to be murdered by Snape on the Quidditch pitch. Still, she was too preoccupied with changing her hair to the most suitable flying form to listen to Wood's pep talk. She picked up her Nimbus and was ready to head out the doors when Wood took her aside.

“Don’t want to pressure you, Potter, but if we ever need an early capture of the Snitch it’s now. Finish the game before Snape can favor Hufflepuff too much.”

“The whole school’s out there!” said Fred, peering out of the door. “Even—blimey—Dumbledore’s come to watch!”

Kate burst out laughing to the confusion of her team mates. “I’ll tell you later,” she wheezed, waving away their questioning looks.

They walked out onto the field to the roars of support from each playing house. The team captains shook each others’ hands and Snape stiffly ordered everyone onto their brooms and he seemed to give an extra long glare to Kate as he was putting the whistle into his mouth. He kicked open the ball box and the game began.

Kate kicked off the ground with amazing speed, soaring high above the game in seconds. In the flurry of flying bodies, she lost sight of the Snitch she’d been watching since take off. She circled the pitch from a great distance, relishing the wind whipping through her now short and spiky hair. As she flew around the pitch, she passed the Hufflepuff Seeker doing the same as she was. She grinned at the young man and called out, “Good luck!” He was one of the few Seekers that didn’t mark the other during the match.

A whistle from below signaled the first penalty awarded to Hufflepuff. Apparently, George had hit a Bludger at Snape. Kate ignored it and kept searching. Snape was really helping her on this. He was pausing the game for penalties but the Seekers could still catch the Snitch. This allowed for Wood to simply keep all the penalty shots out of the rings while Kate did her job.

A second penalty was awarded, but Kate was too busy looking around to notice what the cause was, if there was one. As Snape moved into position to watch the shot, Kate caught a glimmer of gold just below him. With a grin, she flew directly over him, pulled back hard on her broom handle, flipped over completely, and went into a straight down dive.

With the wind howling in her ears, she could barely hear the screams coming from the crowd around her. She didn’t even see if there were

any Bludgers coming her way, that was the twins' job. The Snitch, it seemed, was perfectly content to be drifting several feet below Snape.

Distantly, she heard the other Seeker taking a more controlled dive but he wouldn't make it first. With a wide grin, she shot past Snape, only having enough time to see his shocked face before her hand reached out and snatched the golden ball out of the air. With both hands, she awkwardly pulled up from her dive, bringing her broom to a stop just above the ground. With a graceful hop, she landed on her feet and held her hand up for the crowd.

She grinned madly. It had to be some kind of record. There was no way anyone could have caught the Snitch faster than that. She didn't have the time to worry about that as the Gryffindors came spilling out onto the field. Just before she was engulfed by her house mates, she caught sight of Snape, white-faced and tight-lipped. Kate felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up to see Dumbledore smiling down on her.

"Well done," he said quietly, so only Kate could hear. "Nice to see you haven't been brooding about that mirror...been keeping busy...excellent..."

Snape spat bitterly on the ground.

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Kate left the locker alone some time later, to take her Nimbus Two Thousand back to the broomshed. She couldn't ever remember feeling happier. She'd really done something to be proud of now—no one could say she was just a famous name any more. The evening air had never smelled so sweet. She walked over the damp grass, reliving the last hour in her head, which was a happy blur: Gryffindors running to lift her up onto their shoulders; Ron and Hermione in the distance, jumping up and down, Ron cheering through a heavy nosebleed. She'd have to ask him where he got that.

Kate had reached the shed. She leaned against the wooden door and looked up at Hogwarts, with its windows glowing red in the setting sun. Gryffindor was in the lead. She smiled at the look that had been on Snape's face as she belted past him...

And speaking of Snape...

A hooded figure came swiftly down the front steps of the castle. Clearly not wanting to be seen, it walked as fast as possible toward the forbidden forest. Kate's victory faded from her mind as she watched. She recognized the figure's prowling walk. Snape, sneaking into the forest while everyone else was at dinner—what was going on!

Curious, Kate jumped back on her Nimbus and took off. Gliding silently over the castle she saw Snape enter the forest at a run. She followed. She didn't know what to think of this behavior. She was dead set on him not being guilty but he was acting suspicious.

The trees were so thick she couldn't see where Snape had gone. She flew in circles, lower and lower, brushing the top branches of trees until she heard voices. She glided toward them and landed noiselessly in a towering beech tree.

She climbed carefully along one of the branches, holding tight to her broomstick, trying to see through the leaves.

Below, in a shadowy clearing, stood Snape, but he wasn't alone. Quirrell was there too. Kate couldn't make out the look on his face, but he was stuttering worse than ever. Kate strained to catch what they were saying.

"...d-don't know why you wanted t-t-to meet here of all p-placed, Severus..."

"Oh, I thought we'd keep this private," said Snape, his voice icy. "Students aren't supposed to know about the Philosopher's Stone, after all."

Kate leaned forward. Quirrell was mumbling something. Snape interrupted him.

"Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid's yet?"

"B-b-but Severus, I—"

“You don’t want me as your enemy Quirrell,” said Snape, taking a step toward him.

“I-I don’t know what you—”

“You know perfectly what I mean.”

An owl hooted loudly, and Kate nearly fell out of the tree. She steadied herself in time to hear Snape say, “—your little bit of hocus-pocus. I’m waiting.”

“B-but I d-d-don’t—”

“Very well,” Snape cut in. “We’ll have another little chat soon, when you’ve had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie.”

He threw his cloak over his head and strode out of the clearing. It was almost dark now, but Kate could see Quirrell, standing quite still as though he was petrified.

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“Kate, where have you *been*?” Hermione squeaked.

“We won! You won! We won!” shouted Ron, nearly excited enough to thump her on the back before he blushed awkwardly. “Er...and I gave Malfoy a black eye, and Neville tried to take on Crabbe and Goyle single-handed! He’s still out cold but Madam Pomfery says he’ll be all right—talk about showing Slytherin! Everyone’s waiting for you in the common room, we’re having a party, Fred and George stole some cakes and stuff from the kitchens.”

“Never mind that now,” Kate said breathlessly, ignoring the urge to tell Ron that his brothers never stole a thing from the kitchens. “Let’s find an empty room, you wait ‘til you hear this...”

She made sure Peeves wasn’t inside before shutting the door behind them, then she told them what she’d just seen and heard.

"I *told* you!" Ron exclaimed as soon as she finished. "Snape is up to no good!"

Kate did her best to ignore him and turned to. "So, we were right, it *is* the Philosopher's Stone, and Snape's trying to force Quirrell to help him get it," Kate said reluctantly, making it a point not to make eye contact with either her friends. "He asked if he knew how to get past Fluffy—and he said something about Quirrell's 'hocus-pocus'—I reckon there are other things guarding the stone apart from Fluffy, loads of enchantments, probably, and Quirrell would have one some ante-Dark Arts spell that Snape needs to break through—"

"So you mean the Stone's only safe as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?" Hermione said in alarm, ignoring Kate's sudden change of heart about the Potion's Master.

"It'll be gone by next Tuesday," said Ron.

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Chapter Eleven: Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback

Quirrell, however, must have been braver than they'd thought. In the weeks that followed he did seem to be getting paler and thinner but it didn't look as though he'd cracked yet.

Every time they passed the third-floor corridor, Kate, Hermione, and Ron would press their ears to the door to check that Fluffy was still growling inside. Snape was sweeping about in his usual bad temper, which surely meant that the Stone was still safe. Upon Ron and Hermione's encouragement, whenever Kate passed Quirrell in the corridors, she'd give him an encouraging sort of smile while Ron had started telling people off for laughing at Quirrell's stutter. Her two friends didn't listen to her claims that something felt off about the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.

Yet, with even all of these things to worry about, Hermione and Kate started to draw up study schedules. Kate didn't go as far as color coding everything, but she knew the sensibility of being organized. Frankly, Ron didn't seem like he enjoyed the idea that his two friends had turned back into their bookworm selves. True, Kate did have less time for pranks but she really didn't mind that much. Fred and George were getting on fantastically without her.

Of course, all this led to one of her friends' startlingly frequent arguments.

"Hermione, the exams are ages away."

"Ten weeks," Hermione snapped, glaring over the top of her transfiguration book. "That's not ages, that's like a second to Nicolas Flamel."

"But we're not six hundred years old," Ron reminded her. "Anyway, what are you studying for, you already know it all." Kate grimaced but didn't say anything. She'd let Ron figure out all on his own.

"What am I studying for? Are you crazy? You realize we need to pass these exams to get into second year? They're very important, I should have started studying a month ago, I don't know what's gotten into me..."

Unfortunately, for Ron at least, the teachers seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Hermione. They piled so much homework on them that the Easter holidays weren't nearly as much fun as the Christmas ones, especially for Ron as he didn't seem too motivated to do any work at the beginning of the holidays. Of course, sometimes, Kate thought Hermione was going a bit over board with her studying, but she wisely didn't say anything. Most of their free time was spent in the library, studying, or in Ron's case, doing homework.

"I'll never remember this," Ron burst out one afternoon, throwing down his quill and looking longingly out of the library window. It was the first really fine day they'd had in months. The sky was a clear, forget-me-not blue, and there was a feeling in the air of summer coming.

Kate, who was riffling through her Transfiguration notes to find out if she remembered exactly how turn a match stick into a needle, didn't look up until she heard Ron say, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?"

Hagrid shuffled into view, hiding something behind his back. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat.

"Jus' lookin'," he said, in a shifty voice that got their interest at once. "An' what're you lot up ter?" He looked suddenly suspicious. "Yer not still lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?"

"Oh, we found out who he is ages ago," said Ron impressively. "*And* we know what that dog's guarding, it's a Philosopher's St—OW!"

Kate kicked Ron hard in the shin just as Hagrid shushed Ron. He was looking around quickly to see if anyone was listening. "Don' go shoutin' about it, what's the matter with yeh?"

"There are a few things we wanted to ask you, as a matter of fact," said Ron, deftly moving out of range of Kate's feet, "about what's guarding the Stone apart from Fluffy—"

"SHHHH!" said Hagrid, drowning out Ron's voice. "Listen—come an' see me later, I'm not promisin' I'll tell yeh anythin', mind, but don' go

rabbitin' about it in here, students aren' s'possed ter know. They'll think I've told yeh—"

"See you later, then," Kate said, still glaring at Ron for his two slip ups in such an enclosed space. Hagrid shuffled off.

"What was he hiding behind his back?" said Hermione thoughtfully.

"Do you think it had anything to do with the Stone?"

"I'm going to see what section he was in," said Ron, who'd probably had enough of working. He came back a minute later with a pile of books in his arms and slammed them down on the table.

"*Dragons!*" he whispered. "Hagrid was looking up stuff about dragons! Look at these: *Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland; From Egg to Inferno, A Dragon Keeper's Guide.*"

"I wonder what he wants with dragon care books," Kate said thoughtfully, tapping her chin with the feathery tip of her quill. "You don't suppose he wants to get one, do you?"

"It's against our laws," said Ron swiftly. "Dragon breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks' Convention of 1709, everyone knows that." Kate was mildly surprised that Ron remembered anything from before he was born and, by the look on her face, so was Hermione. "It's hard to stop Muggles from noticing us if we're keeping dragons in the back garden—anyway, you can't tame dragons, it's dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie's got off wild ones in Romania."

"But there aren't any wild dragons in Britain...are there?" Kate asked worriedly. The last thing she wanted was to be attacked by some raging lizard with wings.

"Of course there are," said Ron. "Common Welsh Greens and Hebridean Blacks. The Ministry of Magic has a job hushing them up, I can tell you. Our kind have to keep putting spells on Muggles who've spotted them, to make them forget."

"So what on earth's Hagrid up to?" asked Hermione.

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When they knocked on the door of the gamekeeper's hut an hour later, they were surprised to see that all the curtains were closed. Hagrid called "Who is it?" before he let them in, and then shut the door quickly behind them.

It was stifling hot inside. Even though it was such a warm day, there was a blazing fire in the grate. Hagrid made them tea and offered them stoat sandwiches, which they refused.

"So—yeh wanted to ask me somethin'?"

"Yes," Kate said. There was no point beating around the bush. "We were wondering if you could tell us what's guarding the Philosopher's Stone apart from Fluffy."

"O' course I can't," he said. "Number one, I don' know meself. Number two, yeh know too much already, so I wouldn' tell yeh if I could. That Stone's here fer a good reason. It was almost stolen outta Gringotts—I s'ppose yeh've worked that out an' all? Beats me how yeh even know abou' Fluffy."

"Oh, come on, Hagrid, you might not want to tell us, but you *do* know, you know everything that goes around here," said Hermione in a warm, flattering voice. Hagrid's beard twitched and they could tell he was smiling. "We only wondered who had *done* the guarding, really." Hermione went on. "We wondered who Dumbledore had trusted enough to help him, apart from you."

Hagrid's chest swelled at these last words. Kate would have hugged Hermione right there if they didn't need answers from Hagrid. That had been brilliant!

"Well, I don' s'ppose it could hurt ter tell yeh that...let's see...he borrowed Fluffy from me...then some o' the teachers did enchantments...Professor Sprout—Professor Flitwick—Professor McGonagall—" he ticked them off in his fingers, "Professor Quirrell—an' Dumbledore himself did somethin', o' course. Hang on, I've forgotten someone. Oh yeah, Professor Snape."

“*Snape?*”

“Yeah—yer not still on abou’ that, are yeh? Look, Snape helped *protect* the Stone, he’s not about ter steal it.”

A while ago, Kate would have agreed with Hagrid but recent events shifted her otherwise. If Snape had been in on protecting the Stone, it must have been easy to find out how the other teachers had guarded it. He probably knew everything—except, it seemed, Quirrell’s part and how to get past Fluffy.

“You’re the only one who knows how to get past Fluffy, aren’t you, Hagrid?” Kate asked anxiously. “And you wouldn’t tell anyone, would you? Not even one of the teachers?”

“Not a soul knows except me an’ Dumbledore,” said Hagrid proudly.

“Well, that’s something,” Kate mumbled to the others before fanning herself with her hand and taking off her robes to hang on the chair. “Hagrid, can we have a window open? I’m boiling.”

“Can’t, Kate, sorry,” said Hagrid. Kate noticed him glance at the fire. She looked at it, too.

“Hagrid—what’s *that?*”

But, she already knew what it was. The question was more of an exclamation of surprise than anything else. For, in the very heart of the fire, underneath the kettle, was a huge, black egg.

“Ah,” said Hagrid, fiddling with his beard, “That’s—er...”

“Where did you get it, Hagrid?” said Ron, crouching over the fire to get a closer look at the egg. “It must’ve cost you a fortune.”

“Won it,” said Hagrid. “Las’ night. I was down in the village havin’ a few drinks an’ got into a game o’ cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest.”

“But what are you going to do with it when it’s hatched?” asked Hermione. Kate had to agree. Raising a dragon in a hut would be quite difficult.

“Well, I’ve bin doin’ some readin’,” Hagrid said, pulling a large book from under his pillow. “Got this outta the library—Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit—it’s a bit outta date, o’ course, but it’s all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, ‘cause their mothers breathe on ‘em, see, an’ when it hatches, feed it on a bucket o’ brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An’ see here—how ter recognize diff’rent eggs—what I got there’s a Norwegian Ridgeback. They’re rare, them.”

He looked very pleased with himself, but Hermione didn’t.

“Hagrid, you live in a *wooden house*,” she said.

But Hagrid wasn’t listening. He was humming merrily as he stoked the fire.

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So now they had something else to worry about: what might happen to Hagrid if anyone found out he was hiding an illegal dragon in his hut.

“Wonder what it’s like to have a peaceful life,” Ron sighed, as evening after evening as he struggled through all the extra homework they were getting. Kate and Hermione, however, were struggling on with studying for their upcoming exams. In a last attempt to help Ron with passing the tests, Hermione made him a study schedule also. Kate was a bit worried though as it seemed to be driving him mad.

Then, one breakfast time, Hedwig brought Kate another note from Hagrid. He had written only two words: *It’s hatching*.

Ron wanted to skip Herbology and go straight down to the hut. Kate had to admit that the prospect of seeing a dragon hatch would be neat but she agreed with Hermione that they couldn’t miss any classes.

“Hermione, how many times in our lives are we going to see a dragon hatching?”

“We’ve got lessons, we’ll get in trouble, and that’s nothing to what Hagrid’s going to be in when someone finds out what he’s doing—”

“Shut up!” Kate whispered fiercely.

Malfoy was only a few feet away and he had stopped dead to listen. How much had he heard? Kate didn’t like the look on Malfoy’s face at all.

“Get lost, Malfoy, before I decide to hurt you,” Kate nearly snarled at the blonde boy. Seeming to realize he was in danger from being cursed by the small girl, Malfoy dashed out of the Great Hall, attracting his cronies as he went.

Ron and Hermione argued all the way up to Herbology and in the end, Hermione agreed to run down to Hagrid’s during morning break. When the bell sounded from the castle at the end of their lesson, the three of them dropped their trowels at once and hurried through the grounds to the edge of the forest. Hagrid greeted them, looking flushed and excited.

“It’s nearly out.” He ushered them inside.

The egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside; a funny clicking noise was coming from it.

They all drew their chairs up to the table and watched with bated breath.

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn’t exactly pretty; Kate thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes.

It sneezed. A couple sparks flew out of its snout. Hazel, who as custom was in Kate’s bag, gave a pitiful meow of fright and burrowed

herself to the bottom of the bag and behind as many books as she could manage. Kate immediately went to calm her poor kitten and eventually removed her from the bag only to cradle her lovingly in her arms.

“Isn’t he *beautiful*?” Hagrid murmured. He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon’s head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs.

“Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!” said Hagrid.

“Hagrid,” said Hermione, “how fast to Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?”

Hagrid was about to answer when the color suddenly drained from his face—he leapt to his feet and ran to the window.

“What’s the matter?”

“Someone was lookin’ through the gap in the curtains—it’s a kid—he’s runnin’ back up ter the school.”

Kate bolted to the door, Hazel giving a surprised meow at the sudden movement, and looked out. Even at a distance there was no mistaking him.

Malfoy had seen the dragon.

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Something about the smile lurking on Malfoy’s face during the next week made Ron and Hermione nervous. It made Kate want to hex him down several flights of stairs. They spent most of their free time in Hagrid’s darkened hut, trying to reason with him.

“Just let him go,” Kate urged. “Set him free.”

“I can’t,” said Hagrid. “He’s too little. He’d die.”

They looked at the dragon. It had grown three times in length in just a week. Smoke kept furling out of its nostrils. Hagrid hadn’t been doing

his gamekeeping duties because the dragon was keeping him so busy. There were empty brandy bottles and chicken feathers all over the floor.

"I've decided to call him Norbert," said Hagrid, looking at the dragon with misty eyes. "He really knows me now, watch. Norbert! Norbert! Where's Mommy?"

"He's lost his marbles," Ron muttered in Kate's ear.

"Hagrid," Kate said loudly, "give it two weeks and Norbert's going to be as long as your house. Malfoy could go to Dumbledore at any moment."

Hagrid bit his lip.

"I—I know I can't keep him forever, but I can't just dump him, I can't."

Kate suddenly turned to Ron.

"Charlie," she said.

"You're losing it, too," said Ron. "I'm Ron, remember?"

"No—Charlie—your brother, Charlie. In Romania. Studying dragons. We could send Norbert to him. Charlie can take care of him and then put him back in the wild!"

"Brilliant!" said Ron. "How about it Hagrid?"

And in the end, Hagrid agreed that they could send an owl to Charlie to ask him.

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The following week dragged by. Wednesday night found Hermione and Kate sitting alone in the common room, long after everyone had gone to bed, with bits of parchment and books sitting around them in organized stacks. The clock on the wall had just chimed midnight when the portrait hole burst open. Ron appeared out of nowhere as he pulled off Kate's invisibility cloak. He had been down at Hagrid's

hut, helping him feed Norbert, who was now eating dead rats by the crate.

“You know, Fred and George were really disappointed that I couldn’t lend them my cloak tonight,” Kate said conversationally as soon as Ron flopped down into the chair across from the two girls.

“I don’t care, it bit me!” he said, showing them his hand, which was wrapped in a bloody handkerchief. “I’m not going to be able to hold a quill for a week. I tell, that dragon’s the most horrible animal I’ve ever met, but the way Hagrid goes on about it, you’d think it was a fluffy little bunny rabbit. When it bit me, he told me off for frightening it. And when I left, he was singing it a lullaby.”

“Ron, only you can complain this much after only a couple hours of work,” Kate replied. Her head snapped up as she heard a tapping on the window. “Hedwig!” She hurried over to let her in. “She’ll have Charlie’s answer!”

The three of them, Ron still grumbling about Kate’s last jibe at him, put their heads together to read the note.

Dear Ron,

How are you? Thanks for the letter—I’d be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won’t be easy getting him here. I think the best thing will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me next week. Trouble is, they mustn’t be seen carrying an illegal dragon.

Could you get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it’s still dark

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love,

Charlie

They looked at one another.

“We’ve got the invisibility cloak,” said Kate. “It shouldn’t be too difficult—I think the cloak’s big enough to cover two of us and Norbert. It works for me, Fred, and George at least and those two aren’t little pixies.”

It was a mark of how bad the last week had been that the other two agreed with her. Anything to get rid of Norbert—and Malfoy.

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There was a hitch. By the next morning, Ron’s bitten hand had swollen to twice its usual size. He didn’t know whether it was safe to go to Madam Pomfery—would she recognize a dragon bite? By the afternoon, though, he had no choice. The cut had turned a nasty shade of green. It looked as if Norbert’s fangs were poisonous.

Kate and Hermione rushed up to the hospital wing at the end of the day to find Ron in a terrible state in bed.

“It’s not just my hand,” he whispered, “although that feels like it’s about to fall off. Malfoy told Madam Pomfery he wanted to borrow one of my books so he could come and have a good laugh at me. He kept threatening to tell her what really bit me—I told her it was a dog, but I don’t think she believes me—I shouldn’t have hit at the Quidditch match, that’s why he’s doing this.”

Kate and Hermione tried to calm Ron down.

“It’ll be over at midnight on Saturday,” said Hermione, but this didn’t soothe Ron at all. On the contrary, he sat bolt upright and broke into a sweat.

“Midnight on Saturday!” he said in a hoarse voice. “Oh no—oh no—I’ve just remembered—Charlie’s letter was in that book Malfoy took, he’s going to know we’re getting rid of Norbert.”

Kate and Hermione didn’t get a chance to answer. Madam Pomfery came over at that moment and made them leave, saying Ron needed sleep.

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"It's too late to change the plan now," Kate told Hermione. "We haven't got time to send Charlie another owl, and this could be our only chance to get rid of Norbert. We'll have to risk it. And we *have* got the invisibility cloak, Malfoy doesn't know about that."

They found Fang the boarhound sitting outside with a bandaged tail when they went to tell Hagrid, who opened the window to talk to them.

"I won't let you in," he puffed. "Norbert's at a tricky stage—nothin' I can't handle."

When they told him about Charlie's letter, his eyes filled with tears, although that might have been because Norbert had just bitten him on the leg.

"Aargh! It's all right, he only got my boot—jus' playin'—he's only a baby, after all."

The baby banged its tail on the wall, making the windows rattle. Kate and Hermione walked back to the castle feeling Saturday couldn't come quickly enough.

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They would have felt sorry for Hagrid when the time came for him to say good-bye to Norbert if they hadn't been so worried about what they had to do. Hermione was worried about the bulk of Norbert while Kate was having misgivings about how quiet the dragon would be in transit. It was a very dark, cloudy night, and they were a bit late arriving at Hagrid's hut because they'd had to wait for Peeves to get out of their way in the entrance hall, where he'd been playing tennis against the wall. Kate hadn't wanted to scare him off because people would get suspicious of the poltergeist not acting like he usually did.

Hagrid had Norbert packed away and ready in a large crate.

"He's got lots o' rats an' some brandy fer the journey," said Hagrid in a muffled voice. "An' I've packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely."

From inside the crate came ripping noises that sounded to Kate as though the teddy was having his head torn off.

“By-bye, Norbert!” Hagrid sobbed as Kate and Hermione covered the crate with the invisibility cloak and stepped underneath it themselves. “Mommy will never forget you!”

Kate and Hermione only had to take a few steps before they realized they weren’t strong enough to carry a dragon, albeit a small one, up to the tower. Being the smallest girls in the school really but a block on what they could and couldn’t do. However, they were also the brightest witches of their year and a couple quick charms caused the crate to become light enough for them to handle.

Midnight ticked nearer as they heaved Norbert up the marble staircases in the entrance hall and along the dark corridors. Up another staircase, then another—even one of Kate’s shortcuts didn’t make the work much faster.

“Nearly there!” Kate whispered to Hermione as they reached the corridor beneath the tallest tower.

Then a sudden movement ahead of them made them almost drop the crate. Forgetting that they were already invisible, they shrank into the shadows, staring at the dark outlines of two people grappling with each other ten feet away. A lamp flared.

Professor McGonagall, in a tartan bathrobe and a hair net, had Malfoy by the ear.

“Detention!” she shouted. “And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how *dare* you—”

“You don’t understand, Professor. Katherine Potter’s coming—she’s got a dragon!”

“What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies! Come on—I shall see Professor Snape about you, Malfoy!”

The steep spiral staircase up to the top of the tower seemed the easiest thing in the world after that. Not until they’d stepped out into

the cold night air did they throw off the cloak, glad to be able to breathe properly again. Hermione did a sort of jig.

“Malfoy’s got detention! I could sing!”

“Don’t,” Kate advised her softly, looking around the tower with narrowed eyes. Finding nothing, she smiled.

Chuckling about Malfoy, they waited, Norbert thrashing about in his crate. About ten minutes later, four broomsticks came swooping down out of the darkness.

Charlie’s friends were a cheery lot. They showed Kate and Hermione the harness they’d rigged up, so they could suspend Norbert between them. They all helped buckle Norbert safely into it and Kate and Hermione shook hands with the others and thanked them very much.

At last, Norbert was going...going...*gone*.

They slipped back down the spiral staircase, their hearts as light as their hands, now that Norbert was off them. No more dragon—Malfoy in detention—what could spoil their happiness?

The answer to that was waiting at the foot of the stairs. As they stepped into the corridor, Filch’s face loomed suddenly out of the darkness.

“Well, well, well,” he whispered, “*we are* in trouble.”

Kate was tempted to smash her head against the wall. They’d left the invisibility cloak on top of the tower.

Chapter Twelve: The Forbidden Forest

Things couldn't have been worse.

Filch took them down to Professor McGonagall's study on the first floor, where they sat and waited without saying a word to each other. Hermione was trembling. Excuses, alibis, and wild cover-up stories chased each other around Kate's brain, each more feeble than the last. She couldn't see how they were going to get out of trouble this time. They were cornered. How could they have been so stupid as to forget the cloak? There was no reason on earth that Professor McGonagall would accept for their being out of bed and creeping around the school in the dead of night, let alone being up the tallest astronomy tower, which was out-of-bounds except for classes. Add Norbert and the invisibility cloak, and they might as well be packing their bags already.

Had Kate thought things couldn't have been worse? She was wrong. When Professor McGonagall appeared, she was leading Neville.

"Kate!" Neville burst out, the moment he saw the other two. "I was trying to find you to warn you, I heard Malfoy saying he was going to catch you, he said he had a drag—"

Kate shook her head violently to shut Neill up, but Professor McGonagall had seen. She looked more likely to breathe fire than Norbert as she towered over the three of them.

"I would never have believed it of any of you. Mr. Filch says you were up in the astronomy tower. It's one o'clock in the morning. *Explain yourselves.*"

It was the first time Hermione had ever failed to answer a teacher's question. She was staring at her slippers, as still as a statue.

"I think I've got a good idea of what's been going on," said Professor McGonagall. "It doesn't take a genius to work it out. You fed Draco Malfoy some cock-and-bull story about a dragon, trying to get him out of bed and into trouble. I've already caught him. I suppose you think it's funny that Longbottom here heard the story and believed it, too?"

Kate caught Neville's eye and tried to tell him without words that this wasn't true, because Neville was looking stunned and hurt. Poor, blundering Neville—Kate knew what it must have cost him to try and find them in the dark, to warn them.

"I'm disgusted," said McGonagall. "Four students out of bed in one night! I've never heard of such a thing before! You, Miss Granger, I thought you had more sense. As for you, Miss Potter, I thought Gryffindor meant more to you than this. All three of you will receive detentions—yes, you too, Mr. Longbottom, *nothing* gives you the right to walk around school at night, especially these days, it's very dangerous—and fifty points will be taken from Gryffindor."

"*Fifty?*" Kate gasped—they would lose the lead, the lead she'd won in the last Quidditch match.

"Fifty points *each*," said Professor McGonagall, breathing heavily through her long, pointed nose.

"Professor—please—"

"You *can't*—"

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Potter. Now get back to bed, all of you. I've never been more ashamed of Gryffindor students."

A hundred and fifty points lost. That put Gryffindor in last place. In one night, they'd ruined any chance Gryffindor had had for the house cup. Kate felt as though the bottom of her stomach had dropped out. How could they ever make up for this?

Kate didn't sleep all that night. She could hear Hermione sobbing into her pillow, but she didn't get up to comfort the girl. Personally, she was too shocked to cry. She knew Hermione, like herself, was dreading the dawn. What would happen when the rest of Gryffindor found out what they'd done?

At first, Gryffindors passing the giant hourglasses that recorded the house points the next day thought there'd been a mistake. How could they suddenly have a hundred and fifty points fewer than yesterday? And then the story started to spread: Katherine Potter, the famous

Katherine Potter, their heroine of two Quidditch matches, had lost them all those points, her and a couple of other stupid first years.

From being one of the most popular and admired people in the school, Kate was suddenly the most hated. Even Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs turned on her, because everyone had been longing to see Slytherin lose the house cup. Everywhere Kate went, people pointed and didn't trouble to lower their voices as they insulted her. Slytherins on the other hand, clapped as she walked past them, whistling and cheering, "Thanks Potter, we owe you one!" Yet, there was always one person in Slytherin that never did that when she passed, and she could swear he would give her encouraging smiles.

Blaise Zabini was a hard boy to read because every time she looked back to see if he was indeed smiling, his face was a mask; passive and blank. That really puzzled her, but she didn't have the time to think about it, so she stored it away for later reference.

Still, there were only three people in her own house that stood by her: the Weasleys. It was pretty good to have the twins on their side as they were able to scare away anyone intent on harm.

It was a bit late to repair the damage, but Kate swore to herself not to meddle in things that weren't her business from now on. She'd had it with spying but couldn't resort to giving up pranking. That was probably the only thing keeping her sane. In fact, she felt so ashamed of herself, she went to Wood and offered to resign from the Quidditch team.

"*Resign?*" Wood thundered. "What good'll that do? How are we going to get any points back if we can't win at Quidditch?"

But even Quidditch had lost its fun. The rest of the team, save Fred and George, wouldn't speak to Kate during practice, and if they had to speak about her, they called her "the Seeker."

Hermione and Neville were suffering, too. They didn't have as bad a time as Kate, because they weren't as well-known, but nobody would speak to them either. Hermione had stopped drawing attention to herself in class, keeping her head down and working in silence.

Kate was glad that the exams weren't far away. All the studying she had to do kept her mind off her misery. She, Hermione, and Ron kept to themselves, working late into the night, trying to remember the ingredients in complicated potions, learn charms and spells by heart, memorize the dates of magical discoveries and goblin rebellions...

Then, about a week before the exams were due to start, Kate's new resolution not to interfere in anything that didn't concern her was put to an unexpected test. Walking back from the library on her own one afternoon, she heard somebody whimpering from a classroom up ahead. As she drew closer, she heard Quirrell's voice.

"No—no—not again, please—"

It sounded as though someone was threatening him. Kate moved closer.

"All right—all right—" she heard Quirrell sob.

Next second, Quirrell came hurrying out of the classroom straightening his turban. He was pale and looked as though he was about to cry. He strode out of sight; Kate didn't think Quirrell even noticed her. She waited until Quirrell's footsteps had disappeared, then peered into the classroom. It was empty, but a door stood ajar at the other end. Kate was halfway toward it before he remembered what she'd promised herself about not meddling.

Still, she wasn't as convinced as her friends that Snape was actually the one trying to steal the stone. Yes, he seemed dark and evil but that would just give him away. She still maintained that Quirrell felt odd, as if he were more and less than what he was. It was rather confusing.

Kate went back to the library, where Hermione was testing Ron on Astronomy. Kate told them what she'd heard.

"Snape's done it, then!" said Ron at once. "If Quirrell's told him how to break his Anti-Dark Force spell—"

There's still Fluffy, though," said Hermione.

“Maybe Snape’s found out who to get past him without asking Hagrid,” said Ron, looking up at the thousands of books surrounding them. “I bet there’s a book somewhere in here telling you how to get past a giant three-headed dog. So what do we do, Kate?”

The light of adventure was kindling again in Ron’s eyes, but Hermione answered before Kate could.

“Go to Dumbledore. That’s what we should have done ages ago. If we try anything ourselves, we’ll be thrown out for sure.”

“But we’ve got no *proof*!” said Kate. “If it is Snape, Quirrell’s too afraid of him to back us up. Snape’s only got to say he doesn’t know how the troll got in at Halloween and that he was nowhere near the third floor—who do you think they’ll believe, him or us? It’s not exactly a secret that ...er...you two hate him, Dumbledore’ll think we made it up to get him sacked. Filch wouldn’t help us if his life depended on it, he’s too friendly with Snape, and the more students get thrown out, the better, he’ll think. And don’t forget, we’re not supposed to know about the Stone or Fluffy. That’ll take a lot of explaining to do.”

Hermione looked convinced, but Ron didn’t.

“If we just do a bit of poking around—”

“No,” said Kate flatly, “we’ve done enough poking around.”

She pulled a map of Jupiter toward her and started to study the names of its moons.

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The following morning, notes were delivered to Kate, Hermione, and Neville at the breakfast table. They were all the same:

Your detention will take place at eleven o’clock tonight. Meet Mr. Filch in the entrance hall.

Professor M. McGonagall

Kate had forgotten they still had detentions to do in the furor over the points they'd lost. She half expected Hermione to complain that this was a whole night of studying lost, but she didn't say a word. Like Kate, she felt they deserved what they'd got.

At eleven o'clock that night, they said good-bye to Ron in the common room and went down to the entrance hall with Neville. Filch was already there—and so was Malfoy. Kate had also forgotten that Malfoy had gotten detention, too.

"Follow me," Filch said, lighting a lamp and leading them outside.

"I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you, eh?" he said, leering at them. "Oh yes...hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me...It's just a pity they let the old punishments die out...hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I've got the chains still in my office, keep 'em well oiled in case they're ever needed...Right, off we go, and don't think of running off, now, it'll be worse for you if you do."

They marched off across the dark grounds. Neville kept sniffing. Kate wondered what their punishment was going to be. It must be something really horrible, or Filch wouldn't be sounding so delighted.

The moon was bright, but clouds scudding across it kept throwing them into darkness. Ahead, Kate could see the lighted windows of Hagrid's hut. Then they heard a distant shout.

"Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started."

Kate's heart rose; if they were going to be working with Hagrid it wouldn't be so bad. Her relief must have shown on her face, because Filch said, "I suppose you think you'll be enjoying yourself with that oaf? Well, think again, girl—it's into the forest you're going and I'm much mistaken if you'll all come out in one piece."

At this, Neville let out a little moan, and Malfoy stopped dead in his tracks.

"The forest?" he repeated, and he didn't sound quite as cool as usual. "We can't go in there at night—there's all sorts of things in there—werewolves, I heard."

Neville clutched the sleeve of Kate's robe and made a choking noise.

"That's your problem, isn't it?" said Filch, his voice cracking with glee. "Should've thought of them werewolves before you got in trouble, shouldn't you?"

"Don't worry, Nev," Kate said in a whisper. "It's not a full moon. They won't be out anyway." Neville shivered in response.

Hagrid came striding toward them out of the dark, Fang at his heel. He was carrying a large crossbow, and a quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder.

"Abou' time," he said. "I bin waitin' fer half an hour already. All right there, Kate, Hermione?"

"I shouldn't be too friendly to them, Hagrid," said Filch coldly, "they're here to be punished, after all."

"That's why yer late, is it?" said Hagrid, frowning at Filch. "Bin lecturin' them, eh? 'Snot your place ter do that. Yeh've done yer bit, I'll take over from here."

"I'll be back at dawn," said Filch, "for what's left of them," he added nastily, and he turned and started back toward the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

Malfoy now turned to Hagrid.

"I'm not going in that forest," he said, and Kate was pleased to hear the note of panic in his voice.

"Yeh are if yeh want ter stay at Hogwarts," said Hagrid fiercely. "Yeh've done wrong an' now yeh've got ter pay fer it."

“But this is servant stuff, it’s not for students to do. I thought we’d be copying lines or something, if my father knew I was doing this, he’d—”

“—tell yer that’s how it is at Hogwarts,” Hagrid growled. “Copyin’ lines! What good’s that ter anyone? Yeh’ll do summat useful or yeh’ll get out. If yeh think yer father’d rather you were expelled, then get back off ter the castle an’ pack. Go on!”

Malfoy dind’t move. He looked at Hagrid furiously, but then dropped his gaze.

“Right then,” said Hagrid, “now, listen carefully, ‘cause it’s dangerous what we’re gonna do tonight, an’ I don’ want no one takin’ risks. Follow me over here a moment.”

He led them to the very edge of the forest. Holding his lamp up high, he pointed down a narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick black trees. A light breeze lifted their hair as they looked into the forest.

“Look there,” said Hagrid, “see that stuff shinin’ on the ground? Silvery stuff? That’s unicorn blood. There’s a unicorn in there bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time this week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We’re gonna try an’ find the poor thin. We might have ter put it out of its misery.”

“And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?” said Malfoy, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

“There’s nothin’ that lives in the forest that’ll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang,” said Hagrid. “An’ keep ter the path. Right, now, we’re gonna split inter two parties an’ follow the trail in diff’rent directions. There’s blood all over the place, it must’ve bin staggerin’ around since last night at least.”

“I want Fang,” said Malfoy quickly, looking at Fang’s long teeth.

“All right, but I warn yeh, he’s a coward,” said Hagrid. “So me, Kate, an’ Hermione’ll go one way an’ Draco, Neville, an’ Fang’ll go the other. Now, if any of us finds the unicorn, we’ll send up green sparks, right?”

Get yer wand out an' practice now—that's it—an' if anyone gets in trouble, send up red sparks, an' we'll all com an' find yeh—so, be careful—let's go."

The forest was black and silent. A little way into it they reached a fork in the earth path, and Kate, Hermione, and Hagrid took the left path while Malfoy, Neville, and Fang too the right.

They walked in silence, their eyes on the ground. Kate eventually lit her wand, prompting Hermione to do the same and Hagrid to smile at them both. With that light, they didn't have any trouble following the trail of silver-blue blood that was scattered around the trail and in the brush.

Kate saw that Hagrid looked very worried.

"*Could* a werewolf be killing the unicorns?" Kate asked. "I just didn't think they were fast enough to catch them."

"Yer right, Kate. It's not easy ter catch a unicorn, they're powerful magic creatures. I never knew one ter be hurt before."

They walked past a mossy tree stump. Kate could hear running water; there must be a stream somewhere close by. There were still spots of unicorn blood here and there along the winding path.

"You all right, you two?" Hagrid whispered. He had probably noticed the pained look on each girl's face at the sight of the blood splattered about. "Don't worry, it can't've gone far if it's this badly hurt, an' then we'll be able ter—GET BEHIND THAT TREE!"

Hagrid seized Kate and Hermione and hoisted them off the path behind a towering oak. He pulled out an arrow and fitted it into his crossbow, raising it, ready to fire. The three of them listened. Something was slithering over dead leaves nearby: it sounded like a cloak trailing along the ground. Hagrid was squinting up the dark path, but after a few seconds, the sound faded away.

"I knew it," he murmured. "There's summat in here that shouldn' be."

“Definitely not a werewolf,” Kate said, shivering slightly as she listened to the eerily quite forest.

“Right you are, Kate. Nothin’ like I’ve ever heard,” said Hagrid grimly. “Right, follow me, but careful, now.”

They walked more slowly, ears straining for the faintest noise. Suddenly, in the clearing ahead, something definitely moved.

“Who’s there?” Hagrid called. “Show yerself—I’m armed!”

And into the clearing came—Kate’s jaw dropped—a centaur. The man half of him had red hair and beard and the horse half was a gleaming chestnut with a reddish tail. Kate finally managed to school her expression and shook Hermione out of her similar state.

“Oh, it’s you, Ronan,” said Hagrid in relief. “How are yeh?”

He walked forward and shook the centaur’s hand.

“Good evening to you, Hagrid,” said Ronan. He had a deep, sorrowful voice. “Were you going to shoot me?”

“Can’t be too careful, Ronan,” said Hagrid, patting his crossbow. “There’s summat bad loose in this forest. This is Katherine Potter an’ Hermione Granger, by the way. Students up at the school. An’ this is Ronan, you two. He’s a centaur.”

“We’d noticed,” Hermione said faintly.

“Good evening,” said Ronan. “Students, are you? And do you learn much, up at the school?”

“Erm—”

“A bit,” said Hermione timidly.

“A bit. Well, that’s something.” Ronan sighed. He flung back his head and stared at the sky. “Mars is bright tonight.”

“Yeah,” said Hagrid, glancing up, too. “Listen, I’m glad we’ve run inter yeh, Ronan, ‘cause there’s a unicorn bin hurt—you seen anythin’?”

Ronan didn't answer immediately. He stared unblinkingly upward, then sighed again.

"Always the innocent are the first victims," he said. "So it has been for ages past, so it is now."

"Yeah," said Hagrid. "But have yeh seen anythin', Ronan? Anythin' unusual?"

"Mars is bright tonight," Ronan repeated, while Hagrid watched him impatiently. "Unusually bright."

"Yeh, but I was meanin' anythin' unusual a bit nearer to home," said Hagrid. "So yeh haven't noticed anythin' strange?"

Yet again, Ronan took a while to answer. At last, he said, "The forest hides many secrets."

A movement in the trees behind Ronan made Hagrid raise his bow again, but it was only a second centaur, black-haired and bodied and wilder-looking than Ronan.

"Hullo, Bane," said Hagrid. "All right?"

"Good evening, Hagrid, I hope you are well?"

"Well enough. Look, I've jus' bin askin' Ronan, you seen anythin' odd in here lately? There's a unicorn bin injured—would yeh know anythin' about it?"

Bane walked over to stand next to Ronan. He looked skyward.

"Mars is bright tonight," he said simply.

"We've heard," said Hagrid grumpily. "Well, if either of you do see anythin' let me know, won't yeh? We'll be off, then."

Kate and Hermione followed him out of the clearing, staring over their shoulders at Ronan and Bane until the trees blocked their view.

“Never,” said Hagrid irritably, “try an’ get a straight answer out of a centaur. Ruddy stargazers. Not interested in anythin’ closer’n the moon.”

“Are there many of *them* in here?” asked Hermione.

“Oh, a fair few...Keep themselves to themselves mostly, but they’re good enough about turnin’ up if ever I want a word. They’re deep, mind, centaurs...they know things...jus’ don’ let on much.”

“That wasn’t a centaur we heard earlier, was it?” Kate asked.

“Did that sound like hooves to you? Nah, if yeh ask me, that was what’s bin killin’ the unicorns—never heard anythin’ like it before.”

They walked on through the dense, dark trees. Kate kept looking over her shoulder nervously. She had the nasty feeling they were being watched. She was very glad they had Hagrid and his crossbow with them. They had just passed a bend in the path when Hermione grabbed Hagrid’s arm.

“Hagrid! Look! Red sparks, the others are in trouble!”

“You two wait here!” Hagrid shouted. “Stay on the path, I’ll come back for yeh!”

They heard him crashing away through the undergrowth and stood looking at each other, very scared, until they couldn’t hear anything but the rustling of leaves around them.

“You don’t think they’ve been hurt, do you?” whispered Hermione.

“I don’t care if Malfoy has, but if something’s got Neville...it’s our fault he’s here in the first place.”

The minutes dragged by. Their ears seemed sharper than usual. Kate’s seemed to be picking up every sigh of the wind, every cracking twig. What was going on? Where were the others?

At last, a great crunching noise announced Hagrid’s return. Malfoy, Neville, and Fang were with him. Hagrid was fuming. Malfoy, it

seemed, had snuck up behind Neville and grabbed him as a joke. Neville had panicked and sent up the sparks.

“We’ll be lucky ter catch anythin’ now, with the racket you two were makin’. Right, we’re changin’ groups—Neville, you stay with me and Hermione, Kate, go with Fang an’ this idiot. I’m sorry,” Hagrid added in a whisper to Kate, “but he’ll have a harder time frightenin’ you, an’ we gotta get this done.”

So Kate set off into the heart of the forest with Malfoy and Fang. They walked for nearly half an hour, deeper and deeper into the forest, until the path became almost impossible to follow because the trees were so thick. Kate thought the blood seemed to be getting thicker. There were splashes on the roots of a tree, as though the poor creature had been thrashing around in pain close by. Kate could see a clearing ahead, through the tangled branches of an ancient oak.

“Look—” she murmured, holding out her arm to stop Malfoy.

Something bright white was gleaming on the ground. They inched closer.

It was the unicorn all right, and it was dead. Kate had never seen anything so beautiful and sad. Its long, slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly-white on the dark leaves.

Kate had raised her wand, preparing to fire green sparks into the air, when a slithering sound made her freeze where she stood. A bush on the edge of the clearing quivered...Then, out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast. Kate, Malfoy, and Fang stood transfixed. The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered its head over the wound in the animal’s side, and began to drink its blood.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

Malfoy let out a terrible scream and bolted—so did Fang. The hooded figure raised its head and looked right at Kate—unicorn blood was dribbling down its front. It got to its feet and came swiftly toward Kate. Reacting out of instinct, she snapped up her wand and cried,

“PULSOR!” The gleaming white blast of light splashed against the figure. She would have had more effect with a splash of water.

Then a pain like she’d never felt before pierced her head; it was as though her scar were on fire. Half blinded, she staggered backward. She heard hooves behind her, galloping, and something jumped clean over Kate, charging at the figure.

The pain in Kate’s head was so bad she fell to her knees. It took a minute or two to pass. When she looked up, the figure had gone. A centaur was standing over her, not Ronan or Bane; this one looked younger; he had white-blond hair and a palomino body.

“Are you all right?” said the centaur, pulling Kate to her feet.

“Yes—thank you—what was that?”

The centaur didn’t answer. He had astonishingly blue eyes, like pale sapphires. He looked carefully at Kate, his eyes lingering on the scar that stood out, livid, on Kate’s forehead.

“You are the Potter girl,” he said. “You had better get back to Hagrid. The forest is not safe at this time—especially for you. Can you ride? It will be quicker this way.”

“My name is Firenze,” he added, as he lowered himself on to his front legs so that Kate could clamber onto his back.

There was suddenly a sound of more galloping from the other side of the clearing. Ronan and Bane came bursting through the trees, their flanks heaving and sweaty.

“Firenze!” Bane thundered. “What are you doing? You have a human on your back! Have you no shame? Are you a common mule?”

“Do you realize who this is?” said Firenze. “This is the Potter girl. The quicker she leaves this forest, the better.”

“What have you been telling her?” growled Bane. “Remember, Firenze, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens. Have you not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?”

Ronan pawed the ground nervously. "I'm sure Firenze thought he was acting for the best," he said in his gloomy voice.

Bane kicked his back legs in anger.

"For the best! What is that to do with us? Centaurs are concerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our forest!"

Firenze suddenly reared on to his hind legs in anger, so that Kate had to wrap her arms around his torso to stay on.

"Do you not see that unicorn?" Firenze bellowed at Bane. "Do you not understand why it was killed? Or have the planets not let you in on that secret? I set myself against what is lurking in this forest, Bane, yes, with humans alongside me if I must."

And Firenze whisked around; with Kate clutching on as best she could, they plunged off into the trees, leaving Ronan and Bane behind them.

Kate didn't have a clue what was going on.

"Why's Bane so angry?" she asked. "What was that thing you saved me from, anyway?"

Firenze slowed to a walk, warned Kate to keep her head bowed in case of low-hanging branches, but he did not answer Kate's questions. They made their way through the trees in silence for so long that Kate thought Firenze didn't want to talk to her anymore. They were passing through a particularly dense patch of trees, however, when Firenze suddenly stopped.

"Katherine Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used for?"

"No," said Kate, startled by the odd question. "We've only used the horn and tail hair in Potions."

"That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn," said Firenze. "Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you

alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips.”

Kate stared at the back of Firenze’s head, which was dappled silver in the moonlight.

“But who’d be that desperate?” she wondered aloud. “If you’re going to be cursed forever, death’s better, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Firenze agreed, “unless all you need is to stay alive long enough to drink something else—something that will bring you back to full strength and power—something that will mean you can never die. Miss Potter, do you know what is hidden in the school at this very moment?”

“The Philosopher’s Stone! Of course—the Elixir of Life! But...who...” then it snapped in her head.

“Ah, I see you understand now.”

It was as though an iron fist had clenched suddenly around Kate’s heart. Over the rustling of the trees, she seemed to hear a distant voice, pleading with someone desperately: *“Not Kate, please no, take me, kill me instead! Not Kate...”* Kate shivered at remembering that and pushed it to the back of her memory.

“Do you mean,” she whispered, “That was Vold—”

“Kate! Kate, are you all right?”

Hermione was running toward them down the path, Hagrid puffing along behind her. Kate slid to the ground off Firenze’s back and was about to thank the centaur when she was engulfed in a hug that could only have come from Hermione.

“I’m fine, Hermione,” Kate wheezed, lacking the breath to speak up. “The unicorn’s dead, Hagrid, it’s in that clearing back there.”

"This is where I leave you," Firenze murmured as Hagrid hurried off to examine the unicorn. "You are safe now."

"Thank you, Firenze."

Firenze nodded to her. "Good luck, Katherine Potter," he said. "The planets have been red wrongly before now, even by centaurs. I hope this is one of those times."

He turned and cantered into the depths of the forest, leaving Kate shivering behind him.

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Ron had fallen asleep in the dark common room, waiting for them to return. He shouted something about Quidditch fouls when Kate roughly shook him awake. In a matter of seconds, though, he was wide-eyed as Kate began to tell him and Hermione what had happened in the forest.

Kate had collapsed into one of the many comfortable chairs. She was still shaking from the encounter with Voldemort and the memory she relived.

Ron, however, was taking her silence to add up the clues. Badly, in her opinion. "Snape wants the stone for You-Know-Who...and You-Know-Who's waiting in the forest...and all this time we thought Snape just wanted to get rich."

Kate wasn't really paying attention. She didn't even care that Ron seemed to be adding two plus two and getting five. She, in fact, tuned Ron out and began going over her own thoughts.

Firenze saved me, but he shouldn't have...Bane was furious...how was that interfering with what the planets say is going to happen?...They must show Voldemort coming back...Bane thinks Firenze should have let Voldemort kill me...I suppose that is written in the stars as well, she thought glumly.

As if reading her thoughts in that way that only Hermione could, she said, "Kate, everyone says Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-

Who was ever afraid of. With Dumbledore around, You-Know-Who won't touch you. Anyway, who says the centaurs are right? It sounds like fortune-telling to me, and Professor McGonagall says that's a very imprecise branch of magic."

The sky had turned light before they stopped talking. They went to bed exhausted, their throats sore. But the night's surprises weren't over.

When Kate pulled back her sheets, she found her invisibility cloak folded neatly underneath them. Hazel was busy happily playing with the small note that she had dislodged from the cloak. Gently, Kate picked up her happy kitten and the note, which read:

Just in case.

Chapter Thirteen: Through the Trapdoor

In years to come, Kate would never quite remember how she had managed to get through her exams when she half expected Voldemort to come bursting through the door at any moment. Yet, the days crept by, and there could be no doubt that Fluffy was still alive and well behind the locked door.

It was sweltering hot, especially in the large classroom where they did their written papers. They had been given special, new quills for the exams, which had been bewitched with an Anti-Cheating spell.

They had practical exams as well. Professor Flitwick called them up one by one into his class to see if they could make a pineapple tap-dance across a desk. Professor McGonagall watched them turn a mouse into a snuffbox—points were given for how pretty the snuffbox was, but taken away if it had whiskers. Snape made them all nervous, breathing down their necks while they tried to remember how to make a Forgetfulness potion.

Kate couldn't help but notice that he was extra mean to her, although he was disappointed when he couldn't find anything wrong with her potion. She'd noticed, over the last couple of months, that Snape had stopped awarding her points in class and treated her as bad, if not worse than, the other Gryffindors. Maybe it was something she did?

Still, even with Snape doing his best to be cruel to her, she thought she did well in his class. Well, as well as could be expected when one had to try to ignore the stabbing pains in her forehead, which had been bothering her ever since her trip into the forest. Hermione though Kate had a bad case of exam nerves because Kate couldn't sleep, but the truth was that Kate kept being woken up by the sight of her mother being blasted with that deadly curse. It wasn't something she was used to and she hoped she never *did* get used to it.

Maybe it was because they hadn't seen what Kate had seen in the forest, or because they didn't have scars burning on their foreheads, but Hermione and Ron didn't seem as worried about the Stone as Kate. The idea of Voldemort certainly scared them, but he didn't keep visiting them in dreams, and they were so busy with their studying they didn't have much time to fret about what anyone else might be up to.

Their very last exam was History of Magic. One hour of answering questions about batty old wizards who'd invented self-stirring cauldrons and they'd be free, free for a whole wonderful week until their exam results came out. When the ghost of Professor Binns told them to put down their quills and roll up their parchment, Kate couldn't help cheering with the rest.

"That was far easier than I thought it would be," said Hermione as they joined the crowds flocking out onto the sunny grounds. "I needn't have learned about the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct or the uprising of Elfric the Eager."

Hermione always liked to go through their exam papers afterward, but Ron said this mad him feel ill (Kate merely laughed at his expression as Hermione rambled on), so they wandered down to the lake and flopped under a tree. The Weasley twins and Lee Jordan were tickling the tentacles of the giant squid, which was basking in the warm shallows.

"No more studying," Ron sighed happily, stretching out on the grass. "You could look more cheerful, Kate, we've got a week before we find out how badly we've done, there's no need to worry yet."

Kate was rubbing her forehead.

"That's really not as much my concern as it is yours, Ron," she said irritably. "I wish I knew what this *means!*" My scar keeps hurting—it's happened before, but never as often as this."

"Go to Madam Pomfery," Hermione suggested.

"I'm not ill," Kate said. "I think it's a warning...it means danger's coming..."

Ron couldn't get worked up, it was too hot.

"Kate, relax, Hermione's right, the Stone's safe as long as Dumbledore's around. Anyway, we've never had any proof Snape—"

"Voldemort," Kate interrupted absently causing Ron and Hermione to twitch violently.

"Would you stop saying his name?" Ron whispered fiercely, looking around for anyone that might have overheard. "Right—where was I?—Oh yeah—No proof that Snape found out how to get past Fluffy. He nearly had his leg ripped off once, he's not going to try it again in a hurry. And Neville will play Quidditch for England before Hagrid lets Dumbledore down."

Kate nodded, if only for Ron's sake, but she couldn't shake off the feeling that there was something she'd forgotten to do, something important. When she tried to explain this, Hermione said, "That's just the exams. I woke up last night and was halfway through my Transfiguration notes before I remembered we'd done that one."

Kate was quite sure that the unsettled feeling didn't have anything to do with work, though. She watched an owl flutter toward the school across the bright blue sky, a not clamped in its mouth. Hagrid was the only one who ever sent her letters. Hagrid would never betray Dumbledore. Hagrid would never tell anyone how to get past Fluffy...never...but—

Kate jumped to her feet.

"Where're you going?" said Ron sleepily.

“I’ve just thought of something,” said Kate. She had turned white. “We’ve got to go see Hagrid, now.”

“Why?” panted Hermione, hurrying to keep up.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit odd,” said Kate, scrambling up the grassy slope, “that what Hagrid wants more than anything else is a dragon, and a stranger turns up who just happens to have an egg in his pocket? How many people wander around with dragon eggs if it’s against wizard law? Lucky they found Hagrid, don’t you think? Why didn’t I see it before?”

“What are you talking about?” said Ron, but Kate, sprinting across the grounds toward the forest, didn’t answer.

Hagrid was sitting in an armchair outside his house; his trousers and sleeves were rolled up, and he was shelling peas into a large bowl.

“Hullo,” he said, smiling. “Finished yer exams? Got time fer a drink?”

“Yes, please,” said Ron, but Kate cut him off.

“Now, we’re in a hurry. Hagrid, I’ve got to ask you something. You know that night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you were playing cards with look like?”

“Dunno,” said Hagrid casually, “he wouldn’t take his cloak off.”

He saw the three of them look stunned and raised his eyebrows.

“It’s not that unusual, yeh get a lot o’ funny folk in the Hog’s Head—that’s the pub down in the village. Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn’ he? I never saw his face, he kept his hood up.”

Kate sank down next to the bowl of peas.

“What did you talk to him about, Hagrid? Did you mention Hogwarts at all?”

“Mighta come up,” said Hagrid, frowning as he tried to remember. “Yeah...he asked what I did an’ I told him I was gamekeeper

here...He asked a bit about the sorta creatures I look after...so I told him...an' I said what I'd always really wanted was a dragon...an' then...I can' remember too well, 'cause he kept buyin' me drinks...Let's see...yeah, then he said he had the dragon egg an' we could play cards fer it if I wanted...but he had ter be sure I could handle it, he didn't want it ter go ter any old home...So I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy..."

"And did he—did he seem interested in Fluffy?" Kate asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Well—yeah—how many three-headed dogs d'yeh meet, even around Hogwarts. So I told him, Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus' play him a bit o' music an' he'll go straight off ter sleep—"

Hagrid suddenly looked horrified.

"I shouldn'ta told yeh that!" he blurted out. "Forget I said it! Hey—where're yeh goin'?"

Kate, Hermione, and Ron didn't speak to each other at all until they came to a halt in the entrance hall, which seemed very cold and gloomy after the grounds.

"We've got to go to Dumbledore," said Kate. "Hagrid told a stranger how to get past Fluffy, and it was probably Voldemort under that cloak—it must've been easy, once he'd got Hagrid drunk. I just hope Dumbledore believes us. Firenze might back us up if Bane doesn't stop him. Where's Dumbledore's office?"

They looked around, as if hoping to see a sign pointing them in the right direction. They had never been told where Dumbledore lived, nor did they know anyone who had been sent to see him.

"We'll just have to—" Kate began, but a voice suddenly rang across the hall.

"What are you three doing inside?"

It was Professor McGonagall, carrying a large pile of books.

“We want to see Professor Dumbledore,” Hermione said, rather bravely, Kate and Ron thought.

“See Professor Dumbledore?” Professor McGonagall repeated, as though this was a very fishy thing to want to do. “Why?”

Kate swallowed—now what?

“It’s sort of secret,” she said, but she wished at once that she hadn’t, because Professor McGonagall’s nostrils flared.

“Professor Dumbledore left ten minutes ago,” she said coldly. “He received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and flew off to London at once.”

“He’s *gone*?” Kate asked frantically. “*Now*?”

“Professor Dumbledore is a very great wizard, Potter, he has many demands on his time—”

“But this is important!”

“Something you have to say is more important than the Ministry of Magic, Potter?”

“Look,” said Kate, throwing caution to the winds, “Professor—it’s about the Philosopher’s Stone—”

Whatever Professor McGonagall had expected, it wasn’t that. The books she was carrying tumbled out of her arms, but she didn’t pick them up.

“How do you know—?” she spluttered.

“Professor, I know that someone’s going to try and steal the stone. I’ve got to talk to Professor Dumbledore.”

She eyed Kate with a mixture of shock and suspicion.

“Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow,” she said finally. “I don’t know how you found out about the Stone, but rest assured, no one can possibly steal it, it’s too well protected.”

“But Professor, Vold—”

“Potter, I know what I’m talking about,” she said shortly. She bent down and gathered up the fallen books. “I suggest you all go back outside and enjoy the sunshine.”

But they didn’t.

“It’s tonight,” said Kate, once she was sure Professor McGonagall was out of earshot. “Voldemort’s going through the trapdoor tonight. He’s found out everything he needs, and now he’s got Dumbledore out of the way. He sent that note, I bet the Ministry of Magic will get a real shock when Dumbledore turns up.”

“Will you stop say his name!” Ron moaned.

Hermione and Kate ignored him. “But what can we—”

Hermione gasped. Kate and Ron wheeled around.

Snape was standing there.

“Good afternoon,” he said smoothly.

They stared at him.

“You shouldn’t be inside on a day like this,” he said, with an odd, twisted smile.

“We were just heading up—”

“You want to be more careful,” said Snape, cutting Kate off. “Hanging around like this, people will think you’re up to something. And Gryffindor really can’t afford to lose any more points, can it?”

Kate glared at their professor. They turned to go outside, but Snape called them back.

“Be warned, Potter—any more nighttime wanderings and I will personally make sure you are expelled. Good day to you.”

He strode off in the direction of the staffroom.

Out on the stone steps, Kate turned to the others.

“Right, here’s what we’ve got to do,” she whispered urgently. “One of us is going to hide under the cloak while the other two will be guarding Fluffy’s door. If we make enough ruckus, someone will come to investigate.”

“But, Kate, what about Snape?” Ron inquired.

Kate ran a hand through her hair in annoyance. “Will it really make you feel better if someone tails him?” Ron nodded. “Fine, Hermione, could you do that?”

“Why me?”

“It’s obvious,” said Ron. “You can pretend to be waiting for Professor Flitwick, you know.” He put on a high voice, ““Oh Professor Flitwick, I’m so worried, I think I got question fourteen *b* wrong...””

“Oh, shut up,” said Hermione, but she agreed to go and watch out for Snape.

“Well, I guess we won’t need the cloak then. Come on, Ron, I’ll show you where to hide.”

But that part of the plan didn’t work. No sooner had they reached the door separating Fluffy from the rest of the school than Professor McGonagall turned up again and this time, she lost her temper.

“I suppose you think you’re harder to get past than a pack of enchantments!” she stormed. “Enough of this nonsense! If I hear you’ve come anywhere near here again, I’ll take another fifty points from Gryffindor! Yes, Weasley, from my own house!”

Kate and Ron went back to the common room. Ron had just said, “At least Hermione’s on Snape’s tail,” when the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and Hermione came in.

“I’m sorry, Kate!” she wailed. “Snape came out and asked me what I was doing, so I said I was waiting for Flitwick, and Snape went to get him, and I’ve only just got away, I don’t know where Snape went.”

“Well, that didn’t really matter. Still, it’s happening tonight. This is it, no more chances.”

The other two stared at her. Her pale face shone brightly and her eyes were glittering.

“I’m going out of here tonight and I’m going to try and get to the Stone first.”

“You’re mad!” said Ron.

“You can’t!” said Hermione. “After what McGonagall and Snape have said? You’ll be expelled!”

“SO WHAT!” Kate shouted. “Don’t you understand? If Voldemort gets hold of the Stone, he’s coming back! Haven’t you heard what it was like when he was trying to take over? There won’t be any Hogwarts to be expelled from! He’ll flatten it, or turn it into a school for the Dark Arts! Losing points doesn’t matter anymore, can’t you see? D’you think he’ll leave you and your families alone if Gryffindor wins the house cup? If I get caught before I can get to the Stone, well, I’ll just go back to the orphanage and wait for Voldemort to find me there, it’s only dying a bit later than I would have, because I’m never going over to the Dark Side! I’m going through that trapdoor tonight and nothing you tow say is going to stop me! Voldemort killed my parents, remember?”

She glared at them.

“You’re right, Kate,” said Hermione in a small voice.

“I’ll use the invisibility cloak,” Kate said. “It’s just lucky I got it back.”

“But will it cover all three of us?” Ron asked.

“Of course it wi—all three of us?”

“Oh, come of it, you don’t think we’d let you go alone?”

“Of course not,” said Hermione briskly. “How do you think you’d get the Stone without us? I’d better go and look through my books, there might be something useful...”

“But if we get caught, you two will be expelled, too.”

“Not if I can help it,” said Hermione grimly. “Flitwick told me in secret that I got a hundred and twelve percent on his exam. They’re not throwing me out after that.”

After dinner the three of them sat nervously apart in the common room. Nobody bothered them; none of the Gryffindors had anything to say to Kate any more, after all. This was the first night she hadn’t been upset by it. She and Hermione were skimming through their notes, hoping to come across one of the enchantments they were about to try to break. Ron wasn’t talking much and Kate didn’t want to know what made him look so pale.

Slowly, the room emptied as people drifted off to bed.

“Better get the cloak,” Ron muttered, as Lee Jordan finally left, stretching and yawning. Kate ran upstairs to her dark dormitory. She pulled out the cloak and then her eyes fell on the flute Hagrid had given her for Christmas. She pocketed it for the others to use on Fluffy if they needed it—she didn’t think they could sing well enough to soothe the dog to sleep.

She ran back down to the common room.

“We’d better put the cloak on here, and make sure it covers all of us—if Filch spots one of our feet wandering along on its own—”

“What are you doing?” said a voice from the corner of the room. Neville appeared from behind an armchair, clutching Trevor the toad, who looked as though he’d been making another bid for freedom.

“Nothing, Neville, nothing,” said Kate, hurriedly putting the cloak behind her back.

Neville stared at their guilty faces.

"You're going out again," he said.

"No, no, no," said Hermione. "No, we're not. Why don't you go to bed, Neville?"

Kate looked at the grandfather clock by the door. They couldn't afford to waste any more time, Voldemort might even now be playing Fluffy to sleep.

"You can't go out," said Neville, "you'll get caught again. Gryffindor will be in even more trouble."

"You don't understand," said Kate, "this is important."

But Neville was clearly steeling himself to do something desperate.

"I won't let you do it," he said, hurrying to stand in front of the portrait hole. "I'll—I'll fight you!"

"*Neville*," Ron exploded, "get away from that hole and don't be an idiot—"

"Don't call me an idiot!" said Neville. "I don't think you should be breaking any more rules! And you were the one who told me to stand up to people!"

"Yes, but not to *us*," said Ron in exasperation. "Neville, you don't know what you're doing."

He took a step forward and Neville dropped Trevor the toad, who leapt out of sight.

"Go on then, try and hit me!" said Neville, raising his fists. "I'm ready!"

A movement to her left caught Kate's eye. She turned just in time to see Hermione raising her wand.

"Neville," she said, "I'm really, really sorry about this."

Her wand finally centered on Neville.

"*Petrificus Totalus*," she cried.

Neville's arms snapped to his sides. His legs sprang together. His whole body went rigid, he swayed where he stood and then fell flat on his face, stiff as a board.

Hermione and Kate ran to turn him over. Neville's jaws were jammed together so he couldn't speak. Only his eyes were moving, looking at them in horror.

"What've you done to him?" Ron whispered.

"It's a Full Body-Bind," said Hermione miserably. "Oh, Neville, I'm so sorry."

"We had to, Neville, no time to explain," said Kate, giving his shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"You'll understand later, Neville," said Ron as they stepped over him and pulled on the invisibility cloak.

But leaving Neville lying motionless on the floor didn't feel like a very good omen. In their nervous state, every statue's shadow looked like Filch, every breath of wind sounded like Peeves swooping down on them.

At the foot of the first set of stairs, they spotted Mrs. Norris skulking near the top.

"Oh, let's kick her, just this once," Ron whispered in Kate's ear, but Kate shook her head. As she climbed carefully around her, Mrs. Norris turned her lamp-like eyes on them, but didn't do anything.

They didn't meet anyone else until they reached the staircase up to the third floor. Peeves was bobbing halfway up, loosening the carpet so that people would trip.

"Who's there?" he said suddenly as they climbed toward him. He narrowed his wicked black eyes. "Know you're there, even if I can't see you. Are you ghoulie or ghostie or wee student beastie?"

He rose up in the air and floated there, squinting at them.

“Should call Filch, I should, if something’s a-creeping around unseen.”

Kate had a sudden idea. Quickly stepping out from under the cloak before Ron or Hermione could stop her, she confronted the poltergeist.

Peeves almost fell out of the air in shock at her sudden appearance. He caught himself in time and hovered about a foot off the stairs.

“So sorry, Miss Potter, ma’am,” he said greasily. “My mistake, my mistake—I didn’t see you—of course I didn’t, you were invisible—forgive old Peevsie his little joke, ma’am.”

“Peeves,” Kate said with exasperation, “shut up. I’ve got a job for you. It’s important, Peeves, so pay attention.” The poltergeist went rigid.

“I need you in about...oh ten minutes to go banging down to Professor McGonagall’s office. Tell her that someone’s gotten past the dog. She’ll know what to do. Remember, Peeves, ten minutes,” said Kate. Peeves nodded vigorously and took off toward the end of the staircase and presumably, toward the end of the hall. Kate slipped back underneath the cloak.

“How do you *do* that?” Ron whispered with wide eyes.

Kate grinned mischievously. “I didn’t just turn him pink, you know.”

A few seconds later, they were there, outside the third-floor corridor—and the door was already ajar.

“Well, there you are,” Kate said quietly, “Voldemort’s already got past Fluffy.

Ron and Hermione twitched at the name, but Kate didn’t take any notice. She stuck her hand out of the cloak and signaled to Peeves, who was floating purposefully at the other end of the corridor. The poltergeist nodded with a wicked grin. Kate turned to the other two.

“If you want to go back, I won’t blame you,” she said. “You can take the cloak, I won’t need it now.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Ron.

“We’re coming,” said Hermione.

Kate pushed the door open with a resigned sigh.

As the door creaked, low, rumbling growls met their ears. All three of the dog’s noses sniffed madly in their direction, even though it couldn’t see them.

“What’s that at its feet?” Hermione whispered.

“Looks like a harp,” said Ron. “Snape must have left it there.”

Kate decided to ignore him. “It wakes up the moment you stop,” she reminded them. “Well, here goes...”

She stepped out from under the cloak and began to sing loudly and confidently, as she had the last time she’d been in the room. The first notes that left her mouth caused the beast’s eyes to droop instantly. Kate hardly drew breath. Slowly, the dog’s growls ceased—it tottered on its paws and fell to its knees, then it slumped to the ground, fast asleep.

“Keep singing,” Ron warned Kate as they slipped out of the cloak themselves and crept toward the trap door.

“Like I would stop now,” Kate sang along with the notes, startling her friends. She grinned but kept singing.

“I think we’ll be able to pull the door open,” said Ron, peering over the dog’s back. “Want to go first, Hermione?”

“No, I don’t!”

“All right.” Ron gritted his teeth and stepped carefully over the dog’s legs. He bent and pulled the ring of the trapdoor, which swung up and open.

“What can you see?” Hermione said anxiously.

“Nothing—just black—there’s no way of climbing down, we’ll just have to drop.”

“I’ll go first,” Kate sang, once again startling her friends.

“Are you sure?” said Ron. “I don’t know how deep this goes.”

Kate shrugged and pulled her flute out of her pocket and handed it to Hermione. Hermione began to play and Kate couldn’t help but notice how badly the sounds clashed. She stopped singing and stepped over to the trapdoor.

There was no sign of the bottom. Carefully, so as not to drop her wand, she pointed down into the darkness and sent a stream of red sparks flying from her wand. The sparks lit the drop but didn’t provide a bottom.

“That’s discouraging,” she muttered. She put her legs over the edge and looked at Ron. “If anything happens to me, don’t follow. Go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, right? I’ll shoot up green sparks if it’s safe. If not, well...” she trailed off.

“Right,” said Ron uncomfortably.

“See you in a minute, I hope...”

Kate slid in until she was hanging by her fingertips. With one fleeting look at a pale faced Ron and a frightened looking Hermione, Kate let go. Cold, damp air rushed past her as she fell down, down, down, and—

FLUMP! With a funny, muffled sort of thump she landed on something soft. She sat up and felt around, her eyes not used to the gloom. It felt as though she was sitting on some sort of plant. Well, she wasn’t dead so she raised her wand and fired up green sparks. They reached unsuccessfully toward the top of the shaft before floating back down.

In the brief illumination, Kate gasped and began to struggle toward the side of the room, but to little success. The plant had already wrapped around her legs.

A rush of air introduced Ron into Kate's panic driven escape.

"What is this stuff?" were his first words.

Kate didn't have the breath to spare at the moment, as even though she was getting nearer the edge, the plant had wrapped around her midsection, cutting off some of her breathing.

The distant music stopped. There was a loud bark from the dog, but Hermione had already jumped. She landed near Kate, luckily close to the wall.

"We must be miles under the school," she said before she noticed Kate's plight.

"Lucky this plant thing's here, really," said Ron.

"*Lucky!*" shrieked Hermione. "Look at you both!"

She leapt up and struggled toward the damp wall. She had to struggle because the moment she had landed, the plant had started to twist snakelike tendrils around her ankles. As for Ron, his legs had already been bound tightly in long creepers and Kate was now being tied tightly into the plant's embrace.

Hermione managed to free herself before the plant got a firm grip on her. Now she watched in horror as her friends fought to pull the plant off them, or in Kate's case, blast the plant off them. But, the more they strained against it, the tighter and faster the plant wound around them.

"*Diffindo!*" Kate cried, slashing away some of the vines from her wand hand. She wriggled her arm out but the plant started to climb the offending limb.

"Stop moving!" Hermione ordered them. "I know what this is—it's Devil's Snare!"

"Oh, I'm so glad we know what it's called, that's a great help," snarled Ron, leaning back, trying to stop the plant from curling around his neck.

Kate, on the other hand, stopped moving at once when Hermione ordered her too. She knew what Devil's Snare was.

"Hermione, light a fire!" Kate said as the plant slowed its advance but kept curling around her.

"Yes—of course—but there's no wood!" Hermione cried, wringing her hands.

"HAVE YOU GONE MAD?" Ron bellowed. "ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?"

"Oh, right!" said Hermione, and she whipped out her wand, waved it, muttered something, and sent a jet of the same bluebell flames she'd conjured during the winter. In a matter of seconds, the two of them felt the plant loosening its grip as it cringed away from the light and warmth. Wriggling and flailing, it unraveled itself from their bodies, and they were able to pull free.

"Lucky you recognized that, Hermione," said Kate as she joined her by the wall.

"Yeah," said Ron, "and lucky Kate doesn't lose her head in a crisis—'there's no wood,' *honestly*."

"This way," said Kate, pointing down a stone passageway, which was the only way forward.

All they could hear apart from their footsteps was the gentle drip of water trickling down the walls. The passageway sloped downward, and Kate was reminded of Gringotts. With an unpleasant jolt of the heart, she remembered the dragons said to be guarding the vaults in the wizards' bank. If they met a dragon, a fully-grown dragon—Norbert had been bad enough...

Can you hear something?" Ron whispered.

"Kate listened. A soft rustling and clinking seemed to be coming from up ahead.

"Do you think it's a ghost?"

I don't know...sounds like wings to me."

"There's a light ahead—I can see something moving."

They reached the end of the passageway and saw before them a beautifully lit chamber, its ceiling arching high above them. It was full of small jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling all around the room. On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy wooden door.

"Do you think they'll attack us if we cross the room?" said Ron.

"Probably," said Kate. "They don't look very vicious, but I suppose if they all swooped down at once...we'll there's no other choice...I'll run."

She took a deep breath, covered her face with her arms, and sprinted across the room. She expected to feel sharp beaks and claws tearing at her, but nothing happened. She reached the door untouched. She pulled the handle, but nothing happened.

The other two followed her. They tugged and heaved at the door, but it wouldn't budge, not even when Hermione tried her Alohomora charm.

"Now what?" said Ron.

"These birds...they can't be here just for decoration," said Hermione.

They watched the birds soaring overhead, glittering—*glittering*?

"They're not birds!" Kate said suddenly. "They're *keys*! Winged keys—look carefully. So that must mean..." she looked around the chamber while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys. "...yes—look! Broomsticks! We've got to catch the key to the door!"

"But there are *hundreds* of them!"

Ron examined the lock on the door.

"We're looking for a big, old-fashioned one—probably silver, like the handle."

They each seized a broomstick and kicked off into the air, soaring into the midst of the cloud of keys. They grabbed and snatched, but the bewitched keys darted and dived so quickly it was almost impossible to catch one.

Not for nothing, though, was Kate the youngest Seeker in a century. She had a knack for spotting things other people didn't. After a minute's weaving about through the whirl of rainbow feathers, she noticed a large silver key that had a bent wing, as if it had already been caught and stuffed roughly into the keyhole.

"That one!" she called to the others. "That big one—there—no, there—with bright blue wings—the feathers are all crumpled on one side."

Ron went speeding in the direction that Kate was pointing, crashing into the ceiling with a hard thud, and nearly falling off his broom.

"We've got to close in on it!" Kate called, not taking her eyes off the key with the damaged wing. "Ron, you come at it from above—Hermione, stay below and stop it from going down—and I'll try and catch it. Right, NOW!"

Ron dived, Hermione rocketed upward, the key dodged them both, and Kate streaked after it; it sped toward the wall, Kate leaned forward and with a nasty, crunching noise, pinned it against the stone with one hand. Hermione and Ron's cheers echoed through the high ceiling and Kate groaned, flexing her wrist experimentally. She winced as she flew toward the ground.

They landed quickly, and Kate ran to the door, the key struggling in her hand. She rammed it into the lock and turned—it worked. The moment the lock clicked open, the key took flight again, looking very battered now that it had been caught twice.

"Ready?" Kate asked, rubbing her right wrist briefly before setting her hand on the door handle. Hermione and Ron nodded. She pulled the door open.

The next chamber was so dark they couldn't see anything at all. But as they stepped into it, light suddenly flooded the room to reveal an astonishing sight.

They were standing on the edge of a huge chessboard, behind the black chessmen, which were all taller than they were and carved from what looked like black stone. Facing them, way across the chamber, were the white pieces. Kate, Hermione, and Ron shivered slightly—the towering white chessmen had no faces.

“Now what do we do?” Kate whispered.

“It's obvious, isn't it?” said Ron. “We've got to play our way across the room.”

Behind the white pieces they could see another door.

“How?” said Hermione nervously.

“I think,” said Ron, “we've going to have to be chessmen.”

“You have to be joking!” said Kate, having witnessed and participated in wizard's chess several times and had no intention to voluntarily getting her head knocked off.

“I'm not,” said Ron as he walked up to a black knight and put his hand out to touch the knight's horse. At once, the stone sprang to life. The horse pawed the ground and the knight turned his helmeted head to look down at Ron.

“Do we—er—have to join you to get across?”

The black knight nodded. Ron turned to the other two.

“This needs thinking about...” he said. “I supposed we've got to take the place of three of the black pieces...”

Kate and Hermione stayed quiet, watching Ron think. Finally, he said, “Now, don't be offended or anything, but neither of you are that good at chess—”

“We’re not offended,” said Kate quickly. “Just tell us what to do.”

“Well, Kate, you take the place of that bishop, and Hermione, you go next to her instead of that castle.”

“What about you?”

“I’m going to be a knight,” said Ron.

The chessmen seemed to have been listening, because at these words a knight, a bishop, and a castle turned their backs on the white pieces and walked off the board, leaving three empty squares that Kate, Hermione, and Ron took.

“White always plays first in chess,” said Ron, peering across the board. “Yes...look...”

A white pawn had moved forward two spaces.

Ron started to direct the black pieces. They moved silently wherever he sent them. Kate’s body was trembling. What if they lost? She really, *really* didn’t want to be taken.

“Kate—move diagonally four squares to the right.” Kate had to think for a moment before she finally realized where Ron was sending her.

Their first real shock came when their other knight was taken. The white queen smashed him to the floor and dragged him off the board, where he lay quite still, facedown.

“Had to let that happen,” said Ron, looking as shaken as Kate felt.. “Leaves you free to take that bishop, Hermione, go on.”

Every time one of their men was lost, the white pieces showed no mercy. Soon there was a huddle of limp black players slumped along the wall. Twice, Ron only just noticed in time that Kate and Hermione were in danger. He himself darted around the board, taking almost as many white pieces as they had lost black ones.

“We’re nearly there,” he muttered suddenly. “Let me think—let me think...”

The white queen turned her blank face toward him.

“Yes...” said Ron softly, “it’s the only way...I’ve got to be taken.”

“NO!” Kate and Hermione shouted.

“That’s chess!” snapped Ron. “You’ve got to make some sacrifices! I take one step forward and she’ll take me—that leaves you free to checkmate the king, Kate!”

“But—”

“Do you want to stop Snape or not?”

“Ron—”

“Look, if you don’t hurry up, he’ll already have the Stone!”

There was no alternative.

“Ready?” Ron called, his face pale but determined. “Her I go—now, don’t hang around once you’ve won.”

He stepped forward, and the white queen pounced. She struck Ron hard across the head with her stone arm, and he crashed to the floor—two clipped screams echoed through the hall as the girls watched from their squares—the white queen dragged Ron to one side. He looked as if he’d been knocked out but there was a disturbingly bloody patch in his hair.

Shaking, Kate moved three spaces to the left.

The white king took off his crown and threw it at Kate’s feet. They had won. The chessmen parted and bowed, leaving the door ahead clear. With on last desperate look back at Ron, Kate and Hermione charged through the door and up the next passageway.

“What’ if he’s—”

“He’ll be all right,” said Kate, trying to convince herself of that. “What do you think’s next?”

“We’ve had Sprout’s, that was the Devil’s Snare; Flitwick must’ve put charms on the keys; McGonagall transfigured the chessmen to make them alive; that leaves Quirrell’s spell, and Snape’s...”

They had reached another door.

“All right?” Kate whispered.

“Go on.”

Kate pushed it open.

A disgusting smell filled their nostrils, making both of them pull their robes up over their noses. Eyes watering, they saw, flat on the floor in front of them, a troll even larger than the one they had tackled, out cold with a bloody lump on its head.

“I’m glad we didn’t have to fight that one,” Kate whispered as they stepped carefully over one of its massive legs. “Come on, I can’t breathe.”

She pulled open the next door, both of them hardly daring to look at what came next—but there was nothing very frightening in here, just a table with seven differently shaped bottles standing on it in a line.

“Snape’s,” said Kate. “What do we have to do?”

They stepped over the threshold, and immediately a fire sprang up behind them in the doorway. It wasn’t ordinary fire either; it was purple. At the same time, black flames shot up in the doorway leading onward. They were trapped.

“Look!” Hermione seized a roll of paper lying next to the bottles. Kate looked over her shoulder with some difficulty to read it:

Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,

Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,

One among us seven will let you move ahead,

Another will transport the drinker back instead,

*Two among our number hold only nettle wine,
Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in line.
Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,
To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:
First, however slyly the poison tries to hid
You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;
Second, different are those who stand at either end,
But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;
Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;
Fourth, the second left and the second on the right
Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.*

Kate and Hermione exchanged excited looks and then peered at the bottles. Smiles broke out on both girls' faces as they gazed from the parchment to the bottles and then back to each other.

"Brilliant," they whispered together.

"I can't believe Snape did this! This is amazing. Almost no one else would be able to get by this stage, no matter how powerful," Kate said in awe.

"Well then, let's get to work. Kate, find the wines and bottles that'll get us through and I'll find the poisons."

Kate nodded and then scrutinized the clues once more. The wines were easy. They were simply on either side of the middle bottle. The others were a little more challenging.

After several minutes of thought, however, Kate was pretty sure she had the right substance for each bottle but she decided to run them by Hermione just in case.

“...and so I think the two on the right are the ones that get us through the black fire and the purple fire respectively from the left.”

Hermione nodded. “That’s what I think too. The two on the far left and the one in the middle are definitely the poisons. It makes sense.”

“There’s only one problem,” said Kate.

“And what’s that?”

“The bottle is only big enough for one of us to go,” she stated, holding up the bottle that would take them toward the Stone.

Hermione frowned at the bottle as if she could simply will it to become bigger.

“Here, Hermione, you take the purple fire potion,” said Kate. “No, listen, get back and get Ron. Grab the brooms from the flying-key room, they’ll get you out of the trapdoor and past Fluffy—go straight out and look for McGonagall. She should be waiting there if Peeves did his job right. She might be able to help. After that, send an owl to Dumbledore. He won’t be here for a while, but we still need him.”

“But Kate—what if You-Know-Who is there?”

“Well—I was lucky once, wasn’t I?” said Kate, pointing at her scar with a grim smile. “I might get lucky again.”

Hermione’s lip trembled, and she suddenly dashed at Kate and threw her arms around her.

“*Hermione!*”

“Kate—you’re a great witch, you know.”

“I’m not as good as you,” Kate muttered modestly, yet she kept holding onto Hermione as if she were a life line.

“Me!” said Hermione. “Books! And cleverness! There are more important things—friendship and bravery and—oh Kate—be *careful!*”

“Hey, you don’t think I’m clever?” Kate said in a mock indignant voice, causing Hermione to grin and step back. “You be careful too, okay. Don’t forget to play that flute on your way up.”

“I won’t.”

“All right, you drink first,” said Kate.

Hermione looked at Kate for a moment before she pulled out the cork of her bottle and took a long drink from it. She shuddered.

“It’s not poison, is it?” said Kate anxiously.

“No—but it’s like ice.”

“Quick, go, before it wears off.”

“Good luck—take care—”

“GO!”

Hermione turned and walked straight through the purple fire.

Kate took a deep breath and picked up the smallest bottle. She turned to face the black flames.

“Here I come,” she said, and she drained the little bottle in one gulp.

It was indeed as though ice was flooding her body. She put the bottle down and walked forward; she braced herself, saw the black flames licking her body but couldn’t feel them—for a moment she could see nothing but dark fire—then she was on the other side, in the last chamber.

There was already someone there—but it wasn’t Voldemort as she had expected. Nor was it Snape, as Ron had suspected. It was someone she gave up as a suspect long ago.

Chapter Fourteen: The Man With Two Faces

It was Quirrell.

“*You!*” hissed Kate, glaring at her “Professor.”

Quirrell smiled. His face wasn’t twitching at all.

“Me,” he said calmly. “I wondered whether I’d be meeting you here, Potter.”

“But where’s—” She was going to say Voldemort but he Quirrell interrupted her.

“Severus?” Quirrell laughed, and it wasn’t his usual quivering treble, either, but cold and sharp. “Yes, Severus does seem the type doesn’t he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?”

Kate stared at him. Did he really think her that...that stupid? Suppressing a grin, she decided to play along with Quirrell’s line of thought.

“But Snape tried to kill me,” she said, spouting off what Ron had been trying to convince her of since that fateful Quidditch match.

“No, no, no. *I* tried to kill you. Your friend Miss Granger accidentally knocked me over as she rushed to set fire to Snape at that Quidditch match. She broke my eye contact with you. Another few seconds and I’d have got you off that broom. I’d have managed it before then if Snape hadn’t been muttering a countercurse, trying to save you.”

“Snape was trying to save me?” Kate exclaimed, putting on the most surprised mask she could muster. It must have been working as Quirrell went on.

“Of course.” Why do you think he wanted to referee your next match? He was trying to make sure I didn’t do it again. Funny, really...he needn’t have bothered. I couldn’t do anything with Dumbledore watching. All the other teachers thought Snape was trying to stop

Gryffindor from winning, he *did* make himself unpopular...and what a waste of time, whine after that, I'm going to kill you tonight."

Quirrell snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Kate. She barely had the time to attempt to twitch out of the way before her arms were slammed forcefully to her side. She did manage to prop her right elbow painfully so she had a little room to wriggle her right arm around.

"Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this interesting mirror."

It was only then that Kate realized what was standing behind Quirrell. It was the Mirror of Erised. She didn't pay much attention to it after that as she was concentrating on getting to her wand which was currently in her pocket. Her right arm snaked around but was unable to get enough room to retrieve the piece of wood.

"This mirror is the key to finding the Stone," Quirrell rambled on, tapping his way around the frame. "Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this...but he's in London...I'll be far away by the time he gets back..."

Her struggles against the ropes being futile, Kate decided to turn toward stalling in hopes that Professor McGonagall would get down there soon.

"I saw you and Snape in the forest—" she began.

"Yes," said Quirrell idly, walking around the mirror to look at the back. "He was on to me by that time, trying to find out how far I'd got. He suspected me all along. Tried to frighten me—as though he could, when I had Lord Voldemort on my side..."

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hungrily into it.

"I see the Stone...I'm presenting it to my master...but where is it?"

Kate thought quickly. She had to distract Quirrell from giving his full attention to the mirror.

“But Snape seems to hate me now.”

“Oh, he does,” said Quirrell casually. “He was at Hogwarts with your parents, didn’t you know? As I understand it, when you first came here, he thought you were your mother’s daughter, whom he had a small amount of respect for. Yet, to him, you seemed to show an uncanny relation to your father. James and Severus loathed each other. But he never wanted you *dead*.”

James...I have to remember that if I get out of here..., she thought. “But I heard you a few days ago, sobbing...”

Bingo! she thought as a spasm of fear flitted across Quirrell’s face.

“Sometimes,” he said, “I find it hard to follow my master’s instructions—he is a great wizard and I am weak—”

“You mean he was there in the classroom with you?” Kate gasped.

“He is with me wherever I go,” said Quirrell quietly. “I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it...Since then, I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has been very hard on me.” Quirrell shivered suddenly. “He does not forgive mistakes easily. When I failed to steal the stone from Gringotts, he was most displeased. He punished me...decided he would have to keep a closer watch on me...”

Quirrell cursed under his breath.

“I don’t understand...is the Stone *inside* the mirror? Should I break it?”

Kate’s mind was racing.

What I want more than anything else in the world at the moment, she thought, *is to find the Stone before Quirrell does. So if I look in the mirror, I should see myself finding it—which means I’ll see where it’s hidden! But how can I look without Quirrell realizing what I’m up to?*

She tried to edge to the left, to get in front of the glass without Quirrell noticing, but the ropes around her ankles were too tight: she tripped and fell over. Quirrell ignored her. He was still talking to himself.

“What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, Master!”

To Kate’s horror, a voice answered. A voice that seemed to come from Quirrell himself. A cold, high voice she recognized very vividly.

“Use the girl...Use the girl...”

Quirrell round on Kate.

“Yes—Potter—come here.”

He clapped his hands once, and the ropes binding her fell off. Kate got slowly to her feet.

“Come here,” Quirrell repeated. “Look in the mirror and tell me what you see.”

Kate walked toward him. *I must lie. I must look and lie about what I see, that’s all. Piece of pie*, she thought, trying to reassure herself.

Quirrell moved close behind her. Kate twitched involuntarily. Something about Quirrell was really, *really* weird. She shook off the feeling, closed her eyes, stepped in front of the mirror, and opened her eyes.

She saw her reflection, pale and scared-looking at first. But a moment later, the reflection smiled at her. It put its hand into its pocket and pulled out a blood-red stone. It winked and put the Stone back in its pocket—and as it did so, Kate felt something heavy drop into her real pocket. She repressed a shout of joy and a grin.

“Well?” said Quirrell impatiently. “What do you see?”

Kate searched around for something, anything to see.

“I—I see my parents...smiling at me,” she said, letting a tear run down her face at the memory.

Quirrell cursed again.

“Get out of the way,” he said. Quirrell brushed her aside, sending her staggering out of the way. She felt her heart lighten as she felt the weight of the Stone in her pocket.

She was backing up slowly when Voldemort decided to make another vocal appearance.

“She lies...She lies...”

“Potter, come back here!” Quirrell shouted. Tell me the truth! What did you just see?”

Instead of complying, as Quirrell obviously expected her to do, Kate backed up quickly, but froze once again when Voldemort spoke again, from wherever he was.

“Let me speak to her...face-to-face...”

“Master, you are not strong enough!”

“I have strength enough...for this...”

Petrified, Kate watched in a horrific fascination as Quirrell reached up and began to unwrap his turban. What was going on? The turban fell away. Quirrell’s head looked strangely small without it. Then he turned slowly on the spot.

Kate screamed loudly. Where there should have been a back to Quirrell’s head, there was a face, the most terrible face Kate had ever seen and one she vaguely remembered from her dreams. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

“Katherine Potter...” it whispered.

Kate stared in horror, her mouth still open from the scream she’d let out.

“See what I have become?” the face of Voldemort said. “Mere shadow and vapor...I have form only when I can share another’s

body...but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds...Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks...you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest...and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a new body of my own...Now...why don't you give me that Stone in your pocket?"

So he knew. The feeling suddenly surged back into Kate's legs. She stumbled backward several more feet.

"Don't be a fool," snarled Voldemort. "Better save your own life and join me...or you'll meet the same end as your parents...They died begging me for mercy..."

"SHUT UP!" Kate screamed.

Quirrell was walking backward at her, so that Voldemort could still see her. The evil face was now smiling.

"How touching..." it hissed. "I always value bravery...yes, girl, your parents were brave...I killed your father first, and he put up a courageous fight...but your mother needn't have died...she was trying to protect you...Now give me that Stone, unless you want her to have died in vain."

"NEVER!"

Kate sprang toward the flame door, but Voldemort screamed "SEIZE HER!" and the next second, Kate felt Quirrell's hand close on her wrist. At once, a needle-sharp pain seared across Kate's scar; her head felt as though it was about to split in two; she screamed, tears of pain running down her face that she couldn't stop as she struggled with all her might. To her surprise, Quirrell let go of her. The pain in her head lessened—she looked around wildly to see where Quirrell had gone, and saw him hunched in pain, looking at his fingers—they were blistering before his eyes.

"Seize her! SEIZE HER!" shrieked Voldemort again, and Quirrell lunged, knocking Kate clean off her feet, landing on top of her, both hands around her neck—Kate's scar was almost blinding her with pain, yet she could see Quirrell howling in agony.

“Master, I cannot hold her—my hands—my hands!”

An Quirrell, though pinning Kate to the ground with his knees, let go of her neck and stared, bewildered, at his own palms—Kate could see they looked burned, raw, red, and shiny.

“Then kill her, fool, and be done!” screeched Voldemort.

Quirrell raised his wand to perform a curse, but Kate, by instinct, reached up and grabbed Quirrell’s face—

“Avada—AAAARGH!”

Quirrell rolled off her, his face blistering, too, and then Kate knew: Quirrell couldn’t touch her bare skin, not without suffering terrible pain—her only chance was to keep hold of Quirrell, keep him in enough pain to stop him from doing a curse.

Kate jumped to her feet, caught Quirrell by the arm, and hung on as tight as she could. Quirrell screamed and tried to throw Kate off—the pain in Kate’s head was building—she couldn’t see—she could only hear Quirrell’s terrible shrieks and Voldemort’s yells of, “KILL HER! KILL HER!” and other voices, maybe in Kate’s own head, crying, “Kate! Kate!”

She felt Quirrell’s arm wrenched from her grasp, knew all was lost, and fell into blackness, down...down...down...

Something gold was glinting just above her. The Snitch! She tried to catch it, but her arms were too heavy.

She blinked. It wasn’t the Snitch at all. It was a pair of glasses. How strange.

She blinked again. The smiling face of Albus Dumbledore swam into view above her.

“Good afternoon, Katherine,” said Dumbledore.

Kate blinked a third time, trying to figure out if this was all real. It was then that her conscious mind caught up with her. "Sir! The Stone! It was Quirrell! He's got the Stone! Quick—"

"Calm yourself, Katherine, you are a little behind the times," said Dumbledore. "Quirrell does not have the Stone."

"Then who does? Sire, I—"

"Katherine, please relax, or Madam Pomfery will have me thrown out."

Kate swallowed and looked around. She realized she must be in the hospital wing. She was lying in a bed with white linen sheets, and next to her was a table piled high with what looked like half the candy shop.

"Tokens from your friends and admirers," said Dumbledore, beaming. "What happened down in the dungeons between you and Professor Quirrell is a complete secret, so, naturally, the whole school knows. I believe your friends Misters Fred and George Weasley were responsible for trying to send you a toilet seat. No doubt they thought it would amuse you. Madam Pomfery, however, felt it might not be very hygienic, and confiscated it."

A toilet seat? What were they thinking? she thought while asking, "How long have I been in here?"

"Three days. Miss Granger and Mr. Ronald Weasley will be most relieved you have come around, they have been extremely worried."

"But sir, the Stone—"

"I see you are not to be distracted. Very well, the Stone. Professor Quirrell did not manage to take it from you. I arrived in time to prevent that, although you were doing very well on your own, I must say."

"You got there? What about Professor McGonagall?"

"Minerva thought it best to send Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley to send me the letter while she attempted to get past Hagrid's wonderful

canine. We must have crossed in midair. No sooner had I reached London then it became clear to me that the place I should be was the one I had just left. I arrived just in time to pull Quirrell off you—”

“It was *you*.”

“I feared I might be too late.”

“You nearly were, I couldn’t have kept him off the Stone much longer—”

“Not the Stone, my dear, you—the effort involved nearly killed you. For one terrible moment there, I was afraid it had. As for the Stone, it has been destroyed.”

“Destroyed? But your friend—Nicolas Flamel—”

“Oh, you know about Nicolas?” said Dumbledore, sounding quite delighted. “You *did* do the thing properly, didn’t you? Well, Nicolas and I have had a little chat, and agreed it’s all for the best.”

“But that means he and his wife will die, won’t they?”

“They have enough Elixir stored to set their affairs in order and then, yes, they will die.”

Dumbledore smiled at the look of amazement on Kate’s face.

“To one as young as you, I’m sure it seems incredible, but to Nicolas and Pernelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all—the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them.”

Kate lay there, lost for words. Dumbledore hummed a little and smiled at the ceiling. *Now isn’t that exactly what I was doing during the sorting?* she thought amusedly.

“Sir?” said Kate. “I’ve been thinking...even if the Stone’s gone, Vol—” she cut herself off, looking at the Headmaster apologetically. “I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t—”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Katherine. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.”

“Yes, sir. Well, Voldemort’s going to try other ways of coming back, isn’t he? I mean, he hasn’t gone, has he?”

“No, Katherine, he has not. He is still out there somewhere, perhaps looking for another body to share...not truly alive, he cannot be killed. He left Quirrell to die; he shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies. Nevertheless, Katherine, while you may only have delayed his return to power, it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time—and if he is delayed again, and again, why, he may never return to power.”

Kate nodded, but stopped quickly, because it made her head hurt. Then she said, “Sir, there are some other things I’d like to know, if you can tell me...things I want to know the truth about...”

“The truth.” Dumbledore sighed. “It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution. However, I shall answer your questions unless I have a very good reason not to, in which case I beg you’ll forgive me. I shall not, of course, lie.”

“Well...Voldemort said that he only killed my mother because she tried to stop him from killing me. But why would he want to kill me in the first place?”

Dumbledore sighed very deeply this time,

“Alas, the first thing you ask me, I cannot tell you. Not today. Not now. You will know, one day...put it from your mind for now, Katherine. When you are older...I know you hate to hear this...when you are ready, you will know.”

Kate sighed and knew it would be no good to argue. *On to the next question.*

“But why couldn’t Quirrell touch me?”

“Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realize that love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign...to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good.”

Dumbledore reached over to her, handing her a small, white handkerchief, which Kate gratefully took to dry her tears with. “Thank you,” she said, her voice a little scratchy. “What about the invisibility cloak—do you know who sent it to me?”

“Ah—your father happened to leave it in my possession, and I thought you might like it.” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “Useful things...your father used it mainly for sneaking off to the kitchens to steal food when he was here.”

“And there’s something else...”

“Quirrell said Professor Snape hates me because he hated my father. Is that true?”

“Well, they did rather detest each other. Not unlike yourself and Mr. Malfoy. And then, your father did something Snape could never forgive.”

“What?”

“He saved his life.”

“*What?*”

“Yes...” said Dumbledore dreamily. “Funny, the way people’s minds work, isn’t it? Professor Snape couldn’t bear being in your father’s debt...I do believe he worked so hard to protect you this year because he felt that would make him and your father even. Then he could go back to hating your father’s memory in peace...”

“But he was nice to me at the beginning of the year but he just...changed.”

“Ah, I believe that is because you reminded him so much of your mother. You see, Lily was a very bright student, much as you are now and there was something Severus respected about that, although he didn’t really show it until their seventh year. It seems you may have begun to show a bit too much of your father for his likings; playing Quidditch and joining the Weasley twins in the nightly excursions.”

Kate grinned at that. It was all very complicated and she couldn’t help but think that if Snape just grew up then his life would be much simpler.

“And sir, there’s one more thing...”

“Just the one?”

“How did I get the Stone out of the mirror?”

“Ah, now, I’m glad you asked me that. It was one of my more brilliant ideas, and between you and me, that’s saying something. You see, only one who wanted to *find* the Stone—find it, but not use it—would be able to get it, otherwise they’d just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life. My brain surprises even me sometimes...Now, enough questions. I suggest you make a start on these sweets. Ah! Bertie Bott’s Every Flavored Beans! I was unfortunate enough in my youth to come across a vomit-flavored one, and since then I’m afraid I’ve rather lost my liking for them—but I think I’ll be safe with a nice toffee, don’t you?”

He smiled and popped the golden-brown bean into his mouth. Then he choked and said, “Alas! Ear wax!”

Madam Pomfrey was a nice woman but she was also a nurse.

“Just five minutes,” Kate pleaded.

“Absolutely not.”

“You let Professor Dumbledore in...”

“Well, of course, that was the headmaster, quite different. You need *rest*.”

“What have I been doing for the past three days?” Kate asked irritably. She sighed. “I’m not going to go running around the castle, Madam Pomfery.”

“Oh, very well,” she said. “But five minutes *only*.”

And she let Hermione and Ron in.

“*Kate!*”

Hermione looked like she was ready to fling her arms around her, but Kate was glad she held herself in as her head was still very sore.

“Oh, Kate, we were sure you were going to—Dumbledore was so worried—”

“I’m fine, Hermione. Really,” Kate said, laying a placating hand on Hermione’s shoulder.

“The whole school’s talking about it,” said Ron. “What *really* happened?”

It was one of those rare occasions when the true story is even more strange and exciting than the wild rumors. Kate told them everything: Quirrell; the mirror; the Stone; and Voldemort. Hermione and Ron were a very good audience; they gasped in all the right places, and when Kate told them what was under Quirrell’s turban, Hermione screamed out loud.

“So the Stone’s gone?” said Ron finally. “Flamel’s just going to *die*?”

“That’s what I said, but Dumbledore thinks that ‘to the well-organized mind, death is but the next adventure.’”

“I always said he was off his rocker,” said Ron, looking quite impressed at how crazy his hero was.

“So what happened to you two?” said Kate.

“Well, I got back all right,” said Hermione. “I brought Ron round—that took a while—and flew out and got passed Fluffy—McGonagall was waiting for us and we just finished explaining what was happening down there and how to get past Fluffy when Dumbledore showed up. It was like he already knew—he just said, ‘Kate’s gone after him, hasn’t she?’ and barged into the room, literally knocked out Fluffy and jumped down the trap door.”

“D’you think he meant you to do it?” said Ron. “Sending you your father’s cloak and everything?”

“*Well*,” Hermione exploded, “if he did—I mean to say—that’s terrible—you could have been killed.”

“No, it isn’t,” said Kate thoughtfully. “He’s a funny man, Dumbledore. I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he knows more or less everything that goes on here, you know. I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help. I don’t think it was an accident he let me find out how the mirror worked. It’s almost like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could...”

“Yeah, Dumbledore’s off his rocker, all right,” said Ron proudly. “Listen, you’ve got to be up for the end-of-year feast tomorrow. The points are all in and Slytherin won, of course—you missed the last Quidditch match, we were steamrollered by Ravenclaw without you—but the food’ll be good.”

At that moment, Madam Pomfrey bustled over.

“You’ve had nearly fifteen minutes, now OUT,” she said firmly.

After a good night’s sleep, Kate felt nearly back to normal.

“I want to go to the feast,” she told Madam Pomfrey as she straightened her many candy boxes. “I can, can’t I?”

“Professor Dumbledore says you are to be allowed to go,” she said sniffily, as though in her opinion Professor Dumbledore didn’t realize how risky feasts could be. “And you have another visitor.”

“Oh, good,” said Kate. “Who is it?”

Hagrid sidled through the door as she spoke. As usual, when he was indoors, Hagrid looked too big to be allowed. He sat down next to Kate, took one look at her, and burst into tears.

“It’s—all—my—ruddy—fault!” he sobbed, his face in his hands. “I told the evil git how ter get past Fluffy! I told him! It was the only thing he didn’t know, an’ I told him! Yeh could’ve died! All fer a dragon egg! I’ll never drink again! I should be chucked out an’ made ter lie as a muggle!”

“Hagrid!” said Kate, shocked to see Hagrid shaking with grief and remorse, great tears leaking down into his beard. “Hagrid, he’d have found out somehow, this is Voldemort we’re talking about, he’d have found out even if you hadn’t told him.”

“Yeh could’ve died!” sobbed Hagrid. “An’ don’ say the name!”

“VOLDEMORT!” Kate shouted, and Hagrid was so shocked, he stopped crying. “I’ve met him and I’m calling him by his name. Please cheer up, Hagrid, we saved the Stone, it’s gone, he can’t use it. Have a Chocolate Frog, I’ve got loads...”

Hagrid wiped his nose on the back of his hand and said, “That reminds me. I’ve got yeh a present.”

“It’s not a stoat sandwich, is it?” said Kate anxiously, and at last Hagrid gave a weak chuckle.

“Nah, Dumbledore gave me the day off yesterday ter fix it. ‘Course, he shoulda sacked me instead—anyway, got yeh this...”

It seemed to be a handsome, leather-covered book. Kate opened it curiously and tears sprang to her eyes. It was full of wizard photographs. Smiling and waving at her from every page were her mother and father.

“Sent owls off ter all yer parents’ old school friends, askin’ fer photos...knew yeh didn’ have any...d’yeh like it?”

Kate brushed her tears away and nearly tackled Hagrid, attempting to squeeze enough thanks into him with one hug.

Kate made her way down to the end-of-year feast alone that night. She had been held up by Madam Pomfrey’s fussing about, insisting on giving her one last checkup, so the Great Hall was already full. It was decked out in the Slytherin colors of green and silver to celebrate Slytherin’s winning the house cup for the seventh year in a row. A huge banner showing the Slytherin serpent covered the wall behind the High Table.

When Kate walked in there was a sudden hush, and then everybody started talking loudly at once. She slipped into a seat between Hermione and Ron at the Gryffindor table and tried to ignore the fact that people were standing up to look at her.

Fortunately, Dumbledore arrived moments later. The babble died away.

“Another year gone!” Dumbledore said cheerfully. “And I must trouble you with an old man’s wheezing waffled before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are a little fuller than they were...you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts...”

“Now, as I understand it, the house cup here needs awarding, and the points stand thus: In fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two points; Ravenclaw has four hundred and twenty-six and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy-two.”

A storm of cheering and stamping broke out from the Slytherin table. Kate could see Draco Malfoy banging his goblet on the table. It was a sickening sight.

“Yes, yes, well done Slytherin,” said Dumbledore. “However, recent events must be taken into account.”

The room went very still. The Slytherin's smiles faded a little.

"Ahem," said Dumbledore. "I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes..."

"First—to Mr. Ronald Weasley..."

Ron went purple in the face; he looked like a radish with a bad sunburn.

"...for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Gryffindor cheers nearly raised the bewitched ceiling; the stars overhead seemed to quiver. Percy could be heard telling the other prefects, "My brother, you know! My youngest brother! Got past McGonagall's giant chess set!"

At last there was silence again.

"Second—to Miss Hermione Granger...for the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Hermione nearly talked Kate in her excitement, all the while trying to convey to her that she didn't deserve all those points. It was useless, however, due to the noise Gryffindor table was making.

"Third—to Miss Katherine Potter..." said Dumbledore. The room went deadly quiet. "...for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points."

The din was deafening. Those who could add up while yelling themselves hoarse knew that Gryffindor now had four hundred and seventy-two points—exactly the same as Slytherin. They had tied for the house cup—if only Dumbledore had given Kate just one more point.

Dumbledore raised his hand. The room fell silent.

"There are all kinds of courage," said Dumbledore, smiling. "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to

stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom.”

Someone standing outside the Great Hall might well have thought some sort of explosion had taken place, so loud was the noise that erupted from the Gryffindor table. Kate, Hermione, and Ron stood up to yell and cheer as Neville, white with shock, disappeared under a pile of people hugging him. He had never won so much as a point for Gryffindor before. Kate smiled cheekily at the Slytherins across the hall. They couldn't have surprised them more if they'd dropped a dragon in their midst.

“Which means,” Dumbledore called over the storm of applause, for even Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were celebrating the downfall of Slytherin, “we need a change of decoration.”

He clapped his hands. In an instant, the green hangings became scarlet and the silver became gold; the huge Slytherin serpent vanished and a towering Gryffindor lion took its place. Snape was shaking Professor McGonagall's hand, with a horrible, forced smile.

It was the best evening of Kate's life, better than winning Quidditch, or Christmas, or knocking out mountain trolls...she would never, ever forget tonight.

Kate had almost forgotten that the exam results were still to come, but come they did. To their great surprise, Ron passed with good marks; Hermione had the best grades of the first years, followed closely by Kate. Neville scraped through, his good Herbology mark making up for his abysmal Potions one. They had hoped that Goyle, who was almost as stupid as he was mean, might be thrown out, but he passed, too. It was a shame, but as Ron said, you can't have everything in life.

And suddenly, their wardrobes were empty, their trunks were packed, Neville's toad was found lurking in a corner of the toilets, and Hazel was securely in place on top of Kate's head after refusing to get into her traveling basket. Notes were handed out to all the students, warning them not to use magic over the holidays (“I always hope they'll forget to give use these,” said Fred sadly); Hagrid was there to

take them down to the fleet of boats that sailed across the lake and they boarded the Hogwarts express.

The ride was long and much candy was consumed by everyone in their compartment, although Hermione and Neville ate significantly less than the bottomless pits that seemed to be Kate and Ron. Roughly halfway through the journey home, talk turned to families and what was going to be done over the summer.

Kate was extremely quiet through all this, trying to keep tears from her eyes as the realization that she had nowhere to go once the train reached the platform finally caught up with her. Ron, who was talking all about what he was planning on doing at the Burrow (his home), noticed Kate's lack of participation and *tactfully* asked her: "Hey, Kate, you all right?"

Kate looked up at him, tears threatening to spill over the dams she'd created. "I think I need to use the loo," she said, her voice a little higher than usual. Hermione sent her a questioning look but Ron and Neville merely shrugged and turned back to their conversation.

The corridor was empty and for that, Kate was thankful as she made her way toward the loo at the back of the train.

She stopped at the very last compartment and slipped in, letting the sobs that had wanted to take hold finally gain control. Tears leaked from her closed eyes and ran down her face as her small frame shook. Kate pulled her legs up onto the seat with her and wrapped her arms around her knees, burying her face in her now slightly worn jeans.

Kate didn't know how long she stayed back there crying, or how many people had peeked in at her to see what the commotion was about. She didn't care. Let them see the Girl-Who-Lived cry her eyes out.

The compartment door slid open slowly, as one of the more bold watchers peered at her. She could feel their gaze. *Probably some Slytherin here to taunt me*, Kate thought.

She was right...sort of.

“Are you all right?”

Kate peered through her arms at the sound of the voice. She sniffled once and wiped at her eyes as they were blurry from tears. She couldn't make out who was standing in the doorway.

“What?”

That was the only response she could get out. Standing in the doorway of the compartment was Blaise Zabini.

“Well, I heard someone crying and...” the boy said, trailing off. He looked at her, his gray eyes showing concern Kate would never have imagined anyone in Slytherin to show.

“It's nothing,” said Kate quickly.

Blaise was silent for a moment. “If it were nothing, you wouldn't be crying,” he pointed out.

Kate sighed. “I just don't want this to get around,” she muttered.

“And you think I'd tell?”

“Well...yeah.”

“Why?” Blaise sat down across from her.

“Because...er...”

“Because I'm a Slytherin?”

“Yeah...” Kate looked down at the ground.

“So, you wouldn't even give me a chance?” he asked, almost indignantly.

“I don't know you, why should I?” Kate demanded.

“Have I done anything to you? Did I mock you at school? Scorn you for being good at everything? No, I didn't, even when my housemates were.”

"I noticed. I just thought...I dunno, it was a ruse...some plot, or something."

The two fell into silence as the train kept moving toward London. Kate busied herself with wiping away all the tear stains from her face and Blaise seemed content with looking out the window.

"You know," said Kate, breaking the silence, "you're not as bad as I thought you'd be."

"And you're not as snobbish as I thought *you'd* be," Blaise replied.

"Snobbish? Why would I be snobbish?"

"You grew up as the 'Girl-Who-Lived' with attention plastered all over you. I was expecting someone like Malfoy, someone spoiled."

Kate glared at him. "You know nothing about my life," she said angrily.

Blaise leaned back against the seat. "I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't want to make you angry..."

Kate's expression softened. He really looked genuinely sorry. "It's okay...just a touchy subject," she explained. Blaise nodded. "So, you want to know why I was crying anymore?" she asked, a slight smile on her face. He nodded again. "You promise you won't tell anyone?"

"I won't tell, Katherine."

"It's Kate," she corrected automatically. Kate went on to explain how she never had enough to eat at the orphanage and was always working. How in the summer, it was swelteringly hot and in the winters it was freezing. She explained that she would work from before sunrise and not stop until well after the sun went down. She even told him how she and another one of the girls had to steal the documents recording their acceptances into the orphanage to learn their names

"I don't have a family, no one to look forward to spending the summer with and nowhere to go once I get off this train," she said, her eyes stinging from tears once again.

Blaise handed her a handkerchief and smiled. "Don't worry, I'm sure everything will work out in the end."

Kate sniffled and thanked him for his handkerchief. "Where did you learn to be so proper?"

"All pureblooded children go through a never ending etiquette training course. Well, most that is. Draco Malfoy is obviously lacking in that area."

Kate and Blaise laughed. Silence fell over the two again. "I'd better go before Hermione and Ron send out a search party for me," Kate said, standing up. "It was nice to get to know you, Blaise, even if it was just a little bit. At least now I know not all the Slytherins are horrible prats."

Blaise grinned. "If you think it's bad on the outside, you can't imagine the inside."

"Well, see you around and don't forget to owl me. I don't think I'll have much else to do this summer, assuming I have someplace to be owled," Kate said, and with a final smile, slipped out of the compartment.

As it turned out, Hermione had convinced the boys that Kate had probably wanted some privacy so she wasn't all too surprised to see Kate show up with slightly puffy eyes. Ron had looked like he was about to say something but Hermione had given him one look to shut him up. Slowly, Kate found her way back into the conversation and the train ride was spent much more pleasurably than the last bit of it had.

When they finally got onto the platform, it took them a while to get off the platform and into the muggle world. A wizened hold guard was up by the ticket barrier, letting them go through the gate in twos and threes so they didn't attract attention by all bursting out of a solid wall at once and alarming the Muggles.

"You must come and stay this summer," said Ron, "both of you—I'll send you an owl."

"Thanks," said Kate, "I'll need something to look forward to."

Hermione looked as though she were about to comment when she saw a bit of white sticking out of Kate's jacket pocket. "Kate?"

"Yeah?"

"Who gave you that handkerchief?"

Kate blushed. "I've always had it, Hermione. Didn't you know that?"

"Oh...of course," Hermione said, eyeing her curiously.

Ron missed that bit of conversation as he'd been looking for his parents. It seemed, however, that Kate was found before Ron was.

"There she is, Mom, there she is, look!"

It was Ginny Weasley, the same girl that had been excited to see her as she came to board the Hogwarts Express.

"Katherine Potter!" she squealed. "Look, Mom! I can see—"

"Be quiet, Ginny, and it's rude to point."

Mrs. Weasley smiled down at her.

"Busy year?" she said.

"Very," Kate replied. "Thanks for the fudge and the sweater, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, it was nothing, dear."

"Katherine!"

Kate was nearly tackled from the side by a mop of red hair.

"Harry! How are you? Where's Mitchell?" Kate asked, hugging her cousin.

Harry grinned and pointed behind her. Kate spun around and smiled brightly, flinging herself at the older man.

"How you doin', kiddo? School all right?" Mitchell asked, holding her at arms length. "You grew. I'd say, about an inch or two at least."

"Are you Kate's father?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Actually..." Mitchell began. Kate had a pained look on her face. "...Yes."

Kate nearly fell over right out. "What!" she exclaimed.

"Happy Christmas, Kit," Mitchell said with a grin.

She stared at him for a good ten seconds before she flung her arms around his neck while she began to cry once again. *Blaise was right*, she thought as she said a teary goodbye to Hermione and then made her way with Mitchell and Harry to the car.

Finally, Kate thought as Mitchell started the car and pulled out into traffic, *I have a family*.

A/N: YAY! It's done! No more book one! Let us celebrate! HUZAH! Okay, I'm really, really, *really* sorry for the long wait on this but it has been a pain. I had graduation and college applications and job applications and everything else the world could throw at me in the usual place for me to update. Then, the horrible, not quite writers block attacked and I just didn't feel like pumping this chapter out. It took me more than a week to finally buckle down and write this. Forgive me if it just doesn't feel the same. I had to force myself to sit down and finish this just for you readers. Feel special! Feeling special? Good! Now, I'm going to take a small break (don't hurt me!) and I'll most definitely post the first couple chapters of Chamber of Secrets in a couple of weeks. Then it's back on schedule!

See you in the next book!